



SYLVIA  
MCDANIEL

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BAD GIRLS OF THE WEST

TEMPTING  
TESSA

## **Good Girls Often Get Into Trouble**

### **A woman cannot enter the 1885 National Marksman Association championship.**

But that won't stop Tessa Harris. When her manly disguise is revealed, she is banished by her family and society. Desperate to make the best of her new situation, she becomes a member of the bad girls' club. Only, the man she out gunned refuses to accept defeat. Seth Robinson, the mayor's son is now determined to make her pay for her wicked ways.

Seth Robinson lost the championship to a damn woman. His loss is a blow to his reputation as Fort Worth's biggest womanizer. Suddenly there's only one woman who is a temptation. And that's Tessa.

Who will win this battle of the sexes? Will the bad girl succumb to his womanizing ways, or will she wrap him around her trigger finger?

**Bad Girls of the West**

Scandalous Sadie

Ravenous Rose

Tempting Tessa

Nellie's Redemption

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# Tempting Tessa

Bad Girls of the West #3

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[Virtual Bookseller](#)

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# Chapter 1

Tessa Harris knew she could win this competition. But men didn't like it when a woman beat them and they had done everything they could to keep her from entering the National Marksman Competition.

But she refused to be denied.

Dressed like a man, so far, no one questioned her identity. All her blonde hair was piled in a bun beneath her hat. She wore one of her father's western-cut shirts and a pair of pants that were baggy and loose to hide her well-defined hips. She had a fake mustache glued beneath her nose, and she'd tried to make her skin look unshaven. When she walked, she strode with a manly swagger.

Standing inside the arena in Fort Worth, Texas, she tried not to look directly at the people sitting on the benches, fearing her eyes giving her away. For one thing, her father sat there with her mother and two brothers. She feared her disguise would not fool them. And she worried her father would recognize her guns and his shirt.

Now they were down to the last two events with her and Seth Robinson knocking out the rest of the competition. She couldn't decide if she was going to remove her hat and let her curls down or simply walk away with the cash.

Most likely, she would walk away with the money and the chance to compete nationally.

Of all people, Seth Robinson, the mayor's son, a man she found incredibly handsome, who even caused a few flutters in her blood, was the man she would take down. Her eyes soaked in his broad shoulders, dark hair, high cheekbones, and a slight mustache over a full mouth with incredibly white teeth. When he smiled, those gorgeous lips of his generated tingles skipping down her spine.

An excellent marksman, but she was better. His good looks might serve him well with the ladies, but she was here to win.

Raised by a father who owned a gun smithery, she knew her guns to perfection. She could drill a bullet in a porcupine's butt from fifteen hundred yards with a rifle and make a tin can dance a jig with a six-shooter from fifty feet.



Tessa was the best and everyone in town knew it. And that's why she, aka Elton McClellan, had entered the competition. "Elton" would soon win the day.

"Good luck," Seth said to her, frowning when he glanced at her. Was her mustache on straight?

She reached up and patted it to make certain it remained in place.

Seth had a sister who Tessa had, on more than one occasion, considered using for target practice. Nellie Robinson stirred up more shit in this town than the cowboys down in Hell's Half Acre on a Saturday night.

The woman had almost cost both of her friends their happiness and someday someone was going to get tired of Nellie interfering. And that person could be Tessa.

With a nod, she replied in a deep, gravelly voice that sounded like she was in puberty. "You too."

"The winner buys the loser a beer when this is over," he said with a smile the ladies in town swooned over.

Oh, she would definitely be the winner. But there was no way she would fraternize with the enemy. And Seth was the enemy.

"I don't drink beer," she replied.

"Too bad, I thought maybe we could do some celebrating and maybe even find us a woman. There's a real pretty gal by the name of Tessa Harris who's probably a finer markswoman than either of us. We could look her up and have a private competition. Winner takes the woman."

With a quick swallow, she bit back the gasp that filled her throat. Like hell, winner takes the woman. Not without putting a bullet in them first.

"I'm not disrespectful toward women," she said and turned her back on him, focusing on the competition.

All she had to do was beat him and that would be completely satisfying. They would compete with both a rifle and a pistol. First, Tessa and then Seth.

While lying on the ground aiming her rifle, the wind suddenly picked up and she almost lost her hat. She waited until the breeze settled and then she aimed and fired at the target. All three shots knocked out the bull's-eye.

Standing, she moved to the next station, and in rapid succession, filled the center of the target, clearly leaving no room for error on

Seth's part.

Walking away, she passed him. "Winner takes all."

A frown spread across his face.

Smiling, she moved away from the center of the arena to watch him aim and fire. With the rifle, it was too close to call, and when it came down to the six-shooter, he left a hole in the center of the bull's-eye.

The cash and the chance to compete were hers.

The crowd roared and the judge called them both to the podium in the center of the field. There, Nellie Robinson was waiting to award the prize. Five hundred dollars and a big ribbon showing first place.

With a smile on her face, Tessa hurried to the stage. When she got there, she and Seth stood off to the side as the judge went on and on about a great day of competition.

"Congratulations," Seth said. "That's some mighty fine shooting."

"Thank you," she said, remembering to make her voice sound manly.

"Where did you learn to shoot like that? I don't remember seeing you around here," Seth whispered.

"Haven't been here long," she said and realized that her voice didn't sound hoarse.

A frown appeared between his brows and she turned her back to him. Thank God, this would soon be over.

The hot Texas sun beat down on them and she just wished they would hurry and hand her the prize money. She was ready to pocket that cash and celebrate.

Tessa would be traveling to Washington, D.C. to compete in the national championships.

Finally, Nellie came to stand in front of her with the check and the ribbon. It was all Tessa could do to keep from shouting at her, but she was doing her best to remain calm. No one needed to know who really won this competition.

"Congratulations," Nellie said, handing her the check then reached beneath her hat and hit the brim, knocking it to the ground, Tessa's blonde curls spilled down her shoulders.

A gasp came from the crowd as they all stared at her.

Nellie grinned and took back the check. "Your mustache is coming off. I knew it was you. And now you're disqualified. My

brother wins.”

Ugly laughter came from the woman that Tessa despised. Her friend, Sadie once socked Nellie, and Tessa resisted doing the same. It would only secure her spot in Mrs. Griffin's column in the newspaper.

The judge stood with his mouth open, staring at her. “Tessa Harris?”

“It’s me, Judge.”

“What a disgrace. You’re disqualified.”

Grabbing her hat, she turned to Seth. “You may have won the competition, but we’ll always know who’s the best. Enjoy my money.”

“Winner takes all,” he said with a grin.

Walking away, she wanted to slap him. She hated how her words had come back to bite her.

Now, not only had she lost the regional competition, she could never compete in the national competition. Now her father would be furious for her risking his business. Now she would be the talk of the gossips.

Once again, Tessa’s actions made her a member of the Bad Girls' Club. And she proudly proclaimed her membership. Who wanted to be a good girl when all it got you was trouble?

## Chapter 2

A grin the size of Texas spread across his sister's face as Seth watched his competition walk away. Damn, she was good with a gun and had a sassy, smart mouth that he was just itching to taste.

"I knew it when the wind almost blew her hat off," Nellie said.

It wasn't until she positioned on the grass, her pants showing off her shapely rear end, that he became suspicious. No man he'd ever seen had a pert backside like Tessa Harris. All that blonde hair, flashing sky blue eyes, and a feisty attitude that he'd love to tame.

Still, he would have liked to have beat her fair and square. The woman was a damn good marksman.

"Mrs. Griffin will need to put this in her column. That should ruin Tessa," his sister said with an evil laugh drawing his attention to her. As much as he loved Nellie, the woman had a mean streak a mile long. No one wanted to cross the woman. No one wanted to be part of the tornado path she left strewn through the city.

"Let it be," he said. "She's the best in the city."

His sister crossed her arms across her chest and pushed out her bottom lip in a pout. "I was only trying to help you win."

Didn't she realize that he wanted to win on his own merits and not because Tessa was disqualified for being a woman. He wanted to be the better shooter. He wanted to prove to the city that he was the best marksman.

"Thank you," he said, knowing if he didn't squelch this right now, she would throw an absolute horrible tantrum drawing attention and embarrassing the family. It was what Nellie did when she didn't get her way.

"So where is the national competition being held?"

"Washington," he said. "I'm sure Papa is going to be pleased to hear that this fall I'll be traveling to Washington to compete."

She laughed. "Hardly. And just how did Tessa think she was going to travel to Washington and not be revealed as a woman? The girl is so stupid, she never thinks or acts like a woman."

"Not true," Seth said, remembering her at one of the local balls last year where she was stunning in a ballgown. "Remember the

Cattleman's Ball?"

"How could I ever forget the night Levi proposed to Sadie," she said with a sigh. "The man had choices. Me or Sadie and yet she's the one who managed to snag him."

Seth knew Levi Griffin, and as much as Nellie wanted Levi, he knew the man and she would have been a match made in hell. Nellie would have made Levi's life miserable. His sister needed a strong man who wouldn't tolerate her impetuous ways and show her they held no meaning for him. Someone who could walk away when she threw one of her tantrums like a four-year-old child.

"He wasn't right for you," he told her, knowing it was probably the other way around.

"He would have been perfect for me. Perfect because of his good looks and his bank account. I'm not going to marry a poor man. They must be rich, or he can continue right on down the road."

Shaking his head, he tucked the check into his billfold and then took the ribbon and his sister's arm.

Time to get back to real life and not worry about his chances in the national competition.

"Does Papa know I'm here?"

Nellie started to laugh in a way that let him know he was probably going to get lectured tonight by their father. According to him, Seth was a low life womanizer who didn't want to work. The womanizer, maybe.

But Seth did want to work. Only, he wanted to be his own boss to control his own destiny. Not the one his father had chosen for him.

"Since half the town was here today, I'm certain he does. Is he still pressuring you to go to work for the banker?"

Sitting behind a desk was not what he wanted to do all day. In fact, it would bore him. All his life, he had lived in this cow town, and he had his eyes on a nice piece of property not far from the Burnett Ranch. Raising cattle seemed a good way to make money and not have to deal with all the rules and regulations that his father dealt with.

As mayor of Fort Worth, his father had seen his small law firm grow into something large and profitable. But the law wasn't what Seth wanted to learn. Or banking and finance. He dreamed of his own spread, and his father, much like Nellie, believed that was a common man's profession. Not something good enough for his son.

Seth would be his own boss. His destiny would be in his hands and not the bank's and frankly he didn't care if it was considered a common man's profession.

"Yes," Seth said in response to Nellie's question, "despite the fact he knows I don't want to be a banker."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the woman he was currently pursuing approaching. Irene's family was one of the wealthier ones in town and she was prime virginal real estate that he was trying to investigate.

"Not her," Nellie said with a hiss. "When are you going to drop her?"

His sister had not approved of a single woman he courted. But then again, neither did he. It wasn't that he didn't want to get married, he just wasn't ready.

"When I'm tired of her," he said with a smile.

"I'm sure that's after you've bedded her," she said with disgust.

That was part of the attraction, but so far, this woman had defied him at every turn. Every time he thought he had her worked up enough to take her to bed, she told him not until they were wed. Over and over, he'd heard that phrase and yet he continued to try. She continued to reject him and he was beginning to think he was wasting his time.

"Sister, how do you know of such things? An innocent young woman like yourself," he said teasing.

She flashed her dark eyes at him in a way that promised retribution.

"Irene," Nellie said in that condescending way of hers that made most people bristle.

"Hello, Nellie, Seth," the woman said, turning and smiling at him. "You were excellent today."

Inside he tensed. No, he wasn't good enough. He would have lost except for his sister revealing Tessa's disguise.

But he knew the woman would not have the guts to tell him the truth.

"Thanks," he said.

"Are you coming by tonight?" she asked, smiling at him.

He really wasn't in the mood. In fact, he wanted to sit in the saloon, drown his sorrows, and plan some way to make enough money to purchase the land he wanted.

"Of course," he said, knowing he had to go. Maybe she wasn't

the one he wanted forever, but she would do for right now.

The image of Tessa with her blonde curls swirling in the wind, her back ramrod straight, her sapphire eyes flashing as she spun and walked off the stage came to mind.

What would she be like in bed? Could all that sass be tamed?

An itch began to build inside him. One that let him know if he could convince Tessa to go to bed with him, he would. Irene be damned. He wanted Tessa.

## Chapter 3

Tessa had taken the long road home. She had lingered along the way dreading facing her family. Her father would be furious, and her mother would not understand, so she waited until dark before arriving.

Standing outside, she glanced at the two-story home built not far from downtown. No, it wasn't a palace, but her father made enough money that they were accepted by the wealthiest.

Today, she might have succeeded in their ruination.

She stared up at the windows and sighed. What her father didn't understand was their place in society teetered on the edge. Not famously rich like Sadie's or Nellie's families, the Harris children were just tolerated. Even her good friend Rose had been accepted more than Tessa because her father had been a preacher.

As far as Nellie Robinson was concerned, she was just common trash. No matter how much she tried to befriend the girl, Tessa would never be part of that world.

With a sigh, she walked up the steps and opened the door, knowing she could not delay facing them any longer.

When she walked in, her parents were sitting in the parlor, her brothers nowhere in sight.

"Good evening," she said and started to hurry up the stairs to her room.

"Wait just a minute, young lady," her father said. "You have some explaining to do."

What was there to explain? She had taken a chance and lost.

"Come, sit down," her mother said. "We need to understand why you would humiliate your family by cheating."

How would they have felt if she won? Wouldn't her father's business have garnered more attention and possibly more business because his daughter was a marksman champion?

Knowing this wouldn't be a fun talk, she sank down on the couch opposite them and gazed about at her home and her very upset parents.

"I tried to enter legally, but they refused to accept me because



I'm a woman."

"But you cheated," her father said. "Haven't we taught you better than to take advantage of the rules?"

She hated it when he used the moral logic on her because she believed in law and order, but it was the unjust rules that disturbed her the most. And this one had been unfair.

"Yes, but it wasn't right that they would deny a woman the chance to win. You know I'm better than all of them."

It was true. But because she was a female, they refused to let her compete fairly. Because of that stupid rule, she'd entered as a man.

Her father sighed and her mother shook her head. "I told you it was not a good idea for her to work in the shop. She now thinks she's better than a man. A woman's place is in the home with her family and children."

How many times had she listened to her mother preach to her the value of a woman was the home she created? Yes, she agreed, but why couldn't a woman be more? Why was her worth measured by the husband she married and the home she would someday create?

All she wanted was the chance to prove to the world that this woman was the best marksman. This woman could handle a gun.

"Do I have a husband and a home?"

"No, and you never will if you continue to try to best the men in this town," her mother said. "A woman is supposed to be subservient."

And there was the problem. Tessa didn't want to be subservient to any man or woman, for that matter. Why couldn't a man just accept her for who she was?

"Papa, did you marry mother because she was submissive to you?"

Her father looked sheepish, and she realized that no matter what he said, he ran the risk of either infuriating his wife or his daughter.

"Your mother is right. Letting you work in the shop has put some of those feminist ideas in your head. At this time in your life, you should be more interested in finding a husband than your ability to hit a target with a gun. As of this moment, you're fired."

Stunned, she stared at her father, and all the rage of the day exploded inside her. Her insides tightened and she felt like a bull pawing the ground before it rushed the matador.

"That's not fair. You know how much I enjoy helping you with

the customers, working with the guns and the ammo.”

It was time that she shared with her father. Their love for guns brought them closer, and he knew how this hurt her. He knew and yet he was letting her mother influence his decision.

“After today, I’m going to have to explain to my customers why my daughter felt the need to cheat her way into the competition. Your mother has been after me to keep you from working there. Today, you proved to us that she’s right. You should be searching for a husband, not working at the smithery.”

In the background, she could hear her brothers playing upstairs while she sat here with her parents, her life exploding around her. They were taking away the one thing she loved.

“I’ll never be the kind of wife and mother who sits around and does needlecraft and waits for my husband to come home. If you think you can turn me into that kind of woman, you’re sadly mistaken.”

Her mother sighed. “What kind of woman do you plan on becoming?”

That was a question she asked herself every day. But she never wanted to be like Nellie or the girls who giggled like ninnies or who acted all pompous and better than anyone else. Or like that dreadful Mrs. Griffin, who told outrageous gossip about people in town.

“I want to be like Annie Oakley,” she said. “Traveling the country in a show. Showing off my marksman talent.”

Her mother gasped.

“Absolutely not,” her father said. “I forbid it. That is not the life for a daughter of mine.”

Suddenly with a surety she had never known before, Tessa rose from the couch. She was good at what she did, and she was not ashamed of her marksmanship skills.

“I’ve told you what I want, and you’ve expressed your feelings. What else is left to say?”

Her mother started crying, and while Tessa’s heart ached at making her cry, she knew that her mother and she would never agree on what Tessa wanted for her life. Was it wrong to want something different?

“Tessa,” her father said.

But she walked from the room, climbing the stairs, feeling like the weight of the world rested on her shoulders. No matter what, she still loved her family, though now she feared they would keep

her from what she loved doing.

Maybe it was time for her to move in with Sadie. Wasn't that where all the bad girls went to live when they were no longer accepted?

# Chapter 4

The last two days, Seth had avoided his father because he knew he would get the same lecture he received every time he saw him: Get a job, go to work. Seth even considered taking a job at the bank just long enough to earn the money he needed to buy the land, but he feared getting stuck there. Or even worse, getting fired because of his lack of interest.

As he walked down the Main Street of Fort Worth, he thought of all his options to earn money and none of them intrigued him. If he'd been born twenty years earlier, he would have gone to work on one of the cattle drives. But, now, most of the cattle were shipped by train to Kansas City.

He thought of getting a job working on a ranch to learn the ins and outs, but so far, no one wanted to hire him. No one wanted to anger the mayor by hiring his son. Because his father let everyone know that his son was going to be a lawyer or a banker.

Never would his son take a commoner's job.

He even thought of leaving Fort Worth, but this was his home. The place he knew, and everyone knew him. The place where the women were plentiful.

Deep in thought, he didn't see Tessa until she stood before him blocking his path.

"It's the state champion himself," she said. "Where's your pretty ribbon? Oh wait, you're not really the winner, are you?"

For some reason, he was happy to see her. A warmth filled his chest as he stared at his nemesis.

"Tessa, I didn't recognize you since you aren't wearing men's clothing."

He let his gaze roam over her. Damn, she looked good. The dress showed off her curves to perfection and that blonde hair, pert nose, and full lips made for kissing... Just one taste was all he needed of that sassy mouth.

"Just remember I can outshoot you," she warned.

"Heard you're no longer working at the smithery," he said, knowing that must really upset to her. "What's keeping you busy

these days?"

"I'm learning to knit," she said with sarcasm.

The very thought of her with knitting needles in her hand had him laughing out loud. "Next thing I know, you'll be hosting a tea."

A smile crossed her face. "Only if they allow me to serve whiskey."

He grinned. "You told me you didn't drink."

"No, I said I don't drink beer. Then you made a disgusting remark about the winner takes the woman—me. No man takes me, do you understand?"

The devil was riding him hard. "Oh yeah, no man *would* take you. No man likes his wife to be his competition."

A gasp came from her and suddenly she lifted her dress and kicked him with her pointed-toe cowboy boots.

"Ouch," he said, bending over and rubbing his calf. "Why did you do that?"

"For being mean. The man I marry will never be my competition. He'll be manly enough that he won't have to worry about me besting him at anything. Too bad you will never be his equal, because we know I can beat you."

It was then the idea came to him. And he knew they would both make lots of money. But could he convince her to take a chance on him? Especially when they were standing in the street sparring.

"Let's go drink a whiskey. I have a proposition for you."

Her blue eyes narrowed. "What kind of proposition? I just told you that no man takes me."

Laughter escaped him. If she only knew his wayward thoughts. He would take that deal in a heart beat. Just the chance of taming the brat and experiencing that sassy mouth had him hard as stone.

But he had to make her feel at ease.

"Honey, it's not that kind of deal, but one you'll enjoy. One that will show us once and for all who is the better marksman."

Her eyes widened and he could see her contemplating his offer.

"What saloon are we going to?"

"How about the White Elephant where Rose sang opera," he said, knowing the two girls were good friends.

He offered her his arm and she tilted her head in a way that had him aching to kiss the side of her neck. What was he doing? This woman was his enemy, and yet compared to his night with Irene, he was far more intrigued to spend time with Tessa. Tessa was a

much more interesting woman.

Irene was like all the other women in town—beautiful and intent on catching a wealthy husband.

She laid her hand on the inside of his arm and he glanced down at her. “You can be a lady.”

“Of course, I can, it's just that I get so bored with needlepoint and gossip. Why can't women have a different kind of a life than one doting on their husband and waiting for children?”

It was an interesting concept. One he'd never considered from a woman's point of view.

It was a short walk to the acre and the saloon. They strolled into the darkened space and took a seat. Tessa gazed around the room at the stage and all the tables and paintings of women in scantily clad attire that adorned the walls.

“I think the artist needs a few more lessons. He forgot to paint on the women's clothing.”

A smile crossed Seth's face and he knew she had never been in a saloon before. The woman was an innocent and she probably had never drank a whiskey before either.

“Oh, I don't know. I kind of enjoy seeing the women's bodies,” he said, gazing around before coming back to stare at the woman in front of him. Did she realize good women didn't normally come into a bar?

She shook her head as the saloon girl came to their table. “What can I get you?”

“Two shots of whiskey,” he said grinning.

After she walked off, Tessa glanced at him, her sapphire eyes inquisitive. “What is this grand scheme you have?”

“We hold a competition between ourselves. We have it in the same stadium and we do the same competing exercises to prove once and for all who is the better marksman.”

She shook her head. “No, not enough. People have already seen us compete. There has to be more to it.”

As much as he hated to admit it, she was right. Why would people pay to see them compete the same way again?

“What if we called it the *Battle of the Sexes*,” he said with a laugh, the thought popping into his head. Didn't they battle one another all the time?

Her brows rose and her dark lashes framed her large eyes. “Not bad. I kind of like that. But we still have to come up with something

different.”

He thought about it for a moment longer. “What if we pretend we’re going to have a shootout. We spread a rumor and really play up the contest between one another. Then at the end, we arrange a duel but don’t really shoot each other.”

Sitting across from her, he watched her facial expressions. “Not a bad idea. My family is going to hate me, but this could draw attention to us. What about the money?”

“We’ll have to pay to use the field, but if we charge a dollar a head and have two thousand people show up, we could make some decent money.”

No, it wouldn’t be enough to pay for his land, but it would help to build his growing savings account and trust fund. And it most definitely beat working at the bank for pennies.

“We’d split the proceeds?”

“How about forty percent to the loser and sixty percent to the winner?”

She smiled. “You going to give me part of my winnings back.”

“No, you’re going to give me more of your winnings,” he said laughing.

Just then the waitress came to their table with their drinks and set them down.

He lifted his shot glass. “May the best marksman-woman win.”

“Why thank you,” she said as she lifted her glass and clinked it against his.

They both tossed back the whiskey and Seth watched as her eyes watered. Maybe he should give her a shot of whiskey before the competition.

“So strong,” she said. “I’ve never had it in a shot glass before.”

A grin spread across his face. “You know I’m going to prove to the town that my winning that day was not a fluke.”

“And you know that I’m going to show everyone that I am the rightful winner. That I should be going to that competition in Washington, not you.”

No matter what, they would always disagree on who should have won the competition. But this way, the people of Fort Worth would know that he was the rightful winner.

“Are you going to wear pants?”

“Maybe,” she said. “But then again, I may wear a low cut, clinging dress just to draw your attention away from the target.”

Did she realize how attracted he was to her? Did she know that just sitting across from her all he wanted to do was take her in his arms and kiss that rosy-red sassy mouth?

"Nothing is going to stop me from beating you," he said in a low tone of voice.

She laughed. "I'm not worried. When should we plan this event?"

"I think sometime around the Fourth of July. We could build it up as a great American pastime."

"It is a holiday and people will be looking for something to do. I like that idea," she said.

She signaled the waitress over and ordered another round of drinks.

When the drinks arrived, she lifted her glass and tapped it against his. "To the Battle of the Sexes. May you lose gracefully."

He laughed and tossed his whiskey back and slammed the glass on the table.

"Only problem, I don't intend to lose."

"And neither do I," she said.



# Chapter 5

When they stepped outside of the saloon, Tessa shielded her eyes from the sun.

“Why is it so bright out here?” she asked as the sidewalk seemed to undulate in front of her.

Seth took her by the arm and placed her hand in the crook of his arm. “I think I better hire a wagon to take you home.”

She was perfectly capable of walking home to Sadie’s. In fact, it might sober her up as long as she didn’t run into Seth’s sister or that despicable Mrs. Griffin. Seeing her drunk would be front page news.

“I’m fine,” she said, trying to convince herself and him that the liquor had not affected her.

“Sure you are,” he replied and she giggled. “You’re walking down the street like a drunken sailor.

“I am not,” she replied. “The sidewalk is moving. When did the city get moving sidewalks?”

Seth threw his head back and laughed.

“Yes, you cannot hold your liquor,” he said.

“I most certainly can.”

He whistled down a cab.

“We can walk,” she said.

“Not on the moving sidewalks, we’re not. Besides, I need to get you home,” he said.

How did she tell him without making herself look like a fool that she no longer lived at home? As soon as her parents had gone to bed that night, she’d packed her bags and moved to Sadie’s. Her father fired her from working in the smithery and she fired them from being her parents.

Of course, she still loved them, but they didn’t understand her. At the moment, she wasn’t interested in men. Only in becoming a star in a western show.

The cab pulled to a stop in front of them. It was a handsome carriage, and she shook her head.

“I think you don’t like exercise,” she said. “We could walk.”

When Seth opened the door, she crawled into the carriage and

turned back to see him standing on the street.

“And what if you decide to pass out on me? How do you think I would get you home?”

The thought of passing out on the street was something she had never considered. It didn't sound like fun and would only draw unwanted attention to herself.

“Nah, I'm not going to pass out. But I'm also not going home,” she said.

His face suddenly blanched and she laughed. The man was so into himself that he thought she wanted to go to his place.

Shaking her head, she laughed. His place was not even a consideration.

“I've got plans tonight,” he said.

“So do I,” she said. “A nice hot bath, a good meal, and enjoying my friends' company. Not your place.”

A frown appeared on his face. “So where should I tell the driver to take you?”

“I'm living with the bad girls now.”

She watched as his big brown eyes stared at her. “Where is that?”

“At Sadie King's home.”

People started yelling at the carriage to move. He was blocking traffic and Tessa leaned out of the carriage and yelled back at them. “Wait just a minute. The poor man hasn't been told where to take me.”

When Tessa pulled back inside the carriage, she glanced at Seth. “You going to accompany me home or just let the cab take me?”

A grin spread across his face. “I'm not letting you out of my sight until you are safely inside Sadie's home.”

Maybe the man was more of a gentleman than she previously thought.

“Then get in before they shoot the poor driver,” she said.

Seth climbed into the carriage and gave the man the address for the first stop.

“This is a fancy carriage,” Tessa said, gazing around the inside of the cab. Anywhere they needed to go, her father always drove their wagon. No, it wasn't fancy, but then again, her family was not rich.

Suddenly she turned to Seth, needing to know. “What are you going to do with the money you make on our event?”

“Put it in savings,” he said.

"That sounds really boring," she said. "I'm hoping to purchase a new rifle. I haven't had a new one since I turned twelve."

There were other things she was saving her money for. The last few days, she had been thinking about what she wanted in life. And if she couldn't be in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, then she wanted to open a school where she taught boys and girls to safely shoot a gun. But that wasn't something she disclosed to everyone.

He started laughing.

"I'm glad you find me entertaining," she said.

"Do you hear yourself? How many women would say they want to purchase a rifle? Shouldn't you be thinking about dresses?"

What could she say? She liked dresses as well as any woman, but her heart's desire was a new rifle. Especially if like Annie Oakley, she was invited to be in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show.

"I like dresses. But I have plenty of them. What I really want is a Winchester Lever Action Repeating Rifle."

Seth stared at her, and she suddenly felt uncomfortable. Was that not a good thing to want? He knew rifles; was there a better one?

"You are a unique woman," he said. "My sister would not know one thing about rifles. She couldn't tell you the difference between a Winchester or a Henry. If someone asked her to load one, I'd say run because she'd probably shoot you or whoever she was with. And yet you know exactly what you want."

A sigh escaped her, and she realized she was talking about things that young women who were courted never mentioned. She wouldn't know how to flirt with a man if her life depended on it.

"Remember, I grew up working in a smithery. My papa taught me about guns. I sold guns to men and all the ammo and powder and everything they needed. But now, though I was taught all this information, it's made me an outcast."

Just then they pulled up in front of Sadie's home.

"Is that the reason you moved out of your home?"

"Yes, after being fired from the smithery, I decided to fire them as my parents."

A smile spread across his face. "Sometimes I'd like to fire my parents as well."

"Really?"

"Yes," he said. "Let me walk you to the door."

He stepped out of the carriage and then turned back to face her.

She took his hand and a tingle of something she'd never felt surged through her.

Slowly they walked up to the door. The sun was still shining high in the sky and yet she'd had more fun drinking whiskey with Seth than anything she'd done in a long time.

When they reached the door, she turned to face him. "Thanks. I had a good time, though I think we drank too much whiskey."

"We definitely drank too much whiskey. But I'm excited about our event. I'll ask about renting the event center and get back in touch with you. We're going to do this."

A grin spread across his face and his fingers reached down to wipe the hair from her face, his fingers traced along her jaw. The most incredible sensation filled her.

"Damn, we drank too much whiskey."

His mouth lowered to her lips and then he was kissing her. It was the oddest sensation and she found herself leaning toward him, wanting more. This man was her enemy, her competition, and she was kissing him.

Suddenly she felt her stomach revolting. No, oh no.

She pulled away. No, this couldn't happen to her. Not after he kissed her. She turned her head, leaned over and vomited into the bushes. Of all the embarrassing ways to end their day. She'd never felt so humiliated in all her life.

Tears welled in her eyes. No, she couldn't cry. No one had ever seen her cry and she wasn't about to start now.

"Well, I must say that no one has ever had that kind of reaction to my kiss before."

She couldn't face him.

"Please, just leave," she said with a whimper.

"Oh no, I'm seeing you inside the house," he said, knocking on the door. "We had too much to drink."

Yes, they had. And now her body was revolting.

After he knocked, Sadie opened the door, her eyes wide. "Tessa, are you all right?"

"No," she gasped as the world spun around her once more and she feared throwing up a second time. "I drank too much whiskey."

Sadie frowned at Seth. "I've got her. You can leave now."

"Wait," Tessa moaned. "This changes nothing between us. I still intend to beat you in the Battle of the Sexes."

Though she refused to meet his eyes and look at him, she heard

him chuckle. “Wouldn’t want it any other way.”

# Chapter 6

After a wonderful afternoon drinking with Tessa, Seth was having dinner with Irene's parents. The family were all looking at him like they expected him to pull out a ring and propose any moment.

In a very nice home, they all sat in the formal dining room, servants bringing out each course. He'd worn his best suit and felt incredibly stiff.

That would happen when hell froze over.

He liked Irene. She was a nice young woman searching for just the right socially qualified man. Seth filled all the requirements, but he would never marry her.

She didn't like to fire weapons and she didn't drink whiskey. And she'd never be a spitfire like Tessa. Oh, no, she would be more like his sister Nellie and that was the type of woman he would spend the rest of his life with.

"What do you do for a living, Mr. Robinson? I know your father is the mayor of the city," her mother said as they all sat around the table, eating.

What could he say? He had no real job.

"Right now, I'm trying to get on with a ranch. I'm saving my money and hope to soon have enough to buy land and start cattle ranching."

Irene's father glanced at him, his brows raised. "You don't have a job?"

The man was a lawyer who defended criminals.

"No, sir," he said and felt like he was being judged for not working.

"So, how do you intend to buy this land?" he asked.

Seth knew immediately the man thought just like his father. And maybe they were right, but holding a job didn't feel right.

"Every month, I'm given a little cash from my trust fund. I've been saving that and any winnings I receive from competitions I enter. Plus, I have something in the works that I think will earn me a windfall."

The older man glanced down at his plate of food and then at his wife as if thinking *you brought this idiot into our home. You think I'm letting this fool marry our daughter?*

"Your father is the mayor," the mother repeated, pointing out his social prestige to her husband.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, wishing his father had never won the political race. At the time, it seemed like a good thing, but the position had only brought more scrutiny upon his family. And Nellie enjoyed that to the hilt.

Seth hated it, though it did bring him more women than he'd ever dreamed possible.

Irene glanced at him, a worried frown on her face. It was all he could do not to stand and say *don't worry, I have no intention of marrying your daughter*, but he knew that would not bode well.

What made him agree to this formal dinner tonight? What had he been thinking?

"The food is delicious," he said, trying to smooth things over.

"Thank you. Our cook is one of the best in the city. People are always trying to persuade her to leave us," the woman said.

As soon as they were finished, he would need to make a quick exit because this was not going well.

Finally, after what seemed like forever, they brought out dessert—buttermilk pie. One of his favorites. Irene knew and had probably requested it.

"Thanks, Irene," he said and she smiled, but it wasn't with her usual brilliant radiance.

He smiled at her and got the feeling she was disappointed in tonight. Again, he wondered why he had agreed. But for the last six months, he'd been pursuing her. Longer than he'd stayed with any woman so far, but that was because she kept turning him down. Suddenly, the thrill of catching her didn't seem quite so appealing.

Obviously, her father had decided he was a complete fool, and her mother and she were trying to keep this dinner from being a complete disaster.

Irene was a beautiful young woman. A great catch, but she reminded him of all the women before her who were more interested in society than him. Yes, he liked women. Beautiful women. But lately, he'd been bored.

Until Tessa.

The meal ended and he'd never felt so much relief.

"Mr. and Mrs. Young, thank you for a lovely dinner," he said as they all filed out of the dining room to let the servants clear the table.

Her father sank down into his chair and picked up the paper, ignoring Seth. Her mother smiled and tried to smooth things over.

"Why don't you young people go sit out on the porch. It's a lovely night and I'm sure you'd rather be outside than sitting here with us," she said as she grabbed her knitting.

Seeing the knitting needles and yarn made him smile. As a joke, he should buy Tessa the supplies to learn the craft.

Irene took him by the hand and led him out the door. Their front porch had a swing and she pulled him down beside her.

"That was nice," he said.

She turned and gave him a look that clearly didn't think it went well. What was he supposed to do?

"You think so?" she asked. "Tell me, Seth what are your intentions regarding me? When we kiss, you want to go further than I will consent to. You act like I'm the most exciting woman you've met, but I can see boredom in your eyes. It's like you only want me for one thing."

The woman wasn't stupid.

"Honey, how can you say such a thing? That's not true."

"If you really wanted to bed me so badly that you can hardly wait, then you would ask to marry me. Because that's the only way you're going to have me. A wedding ring is a necessity."

Well, that certainly shot down any plans he had of taking advantage of her. And yet, he'd really grown bored with the chase. Maybe it was time to end it.

"Watching you with my family tonight," she said, "I realized you're not serious about marriage with me or any other woman. In fact, you don't want to marry and be tied down with a family. You're still chasing lofty dreams of a cattle ranch. Paying your way by competing in marksman contests instead of planning our future. You don't want to marry me. You want to bed me. We're both wasting our time."

The woman was breaking up with him. No one broke up with him. Stunned, he stared at her and yet he could not deny what she was saying. It was all true. She was the first woman to see him for what he was and wanted no part of him.

That was a crushing blow to his ego. The second one delivered



by a woman.

"And, yes, Tessa Harris beat you."

Now that hurt. She didn't have to rub it in.

Rising from the swing, she gazed at him and shook her head. "I never thought I would ever say this, but I don't want you. And I feel sorry for any woman who marries you. You're not ready."

With that, she turned and walked into the house, leaving him sitting on the porch swing alone.

Well, that was a first. A woman breaking up with him. It was all he could do not to call out to her to stop. Not because he wanted to stay with her, but rather because he was the one to say when it was over. And Irene had taken charge.

# Chapter 7

Tessa stood watching the waltzing dancers go by, wondering why she had let Sadie convince her to attend the first ball of the summer. Sadie's fiancé, Levi, stood at her side watching over the two women.

Tonight's ball was in the home of the governor of Texas who was visiting from Austin. The home was a gorgeous Victorian mansion that held so many relics from the first settlers.

Tessa doubted she would do any dancing, but she planned on enjoying the night even with the whispers about her being the girl who dressed as a man to compete in the marksman competition.

"Is your mother here tonight?" Tessa asked Levi, knowing there would be a column based on tonight's activities.

"I'm certain she is," Levi said. "She doesn't miss much as you know from the articles she writes in the paper."

Tessa only hoped the woman didn't write an article about her. That would really infuriate her parents and it could harm her brothers who she loved very much.

"Oh no, look who is walking toward us," Sadie said with a hiss. "Seth."

She frowned. Wasn't he attending the ball with his girlfriend? There were rumors that there would soon be an engagement announcement. Irene's family was wealthy and it would be a joining of two of the most powerful families in Fort Worth.

"Good evening," he said, standing in front of her, smiling, and she couldn't help but smile back. They were supposed to be enemies, not friends, and yet she could feel them becoming closer.

And who could deny those twinkling emerald eyes and dark lashes?

"Would you like to dance," he asked.

"Sure, should I wear my six-shooter?"

Laughter came from him as he took her by the hand and led her onto the dance floor.

"You clean up nice," he said. "In fact, in this bronze dress, you look better than most of the women here."

He was lying. Trying to get on her better side and she didn't know why. It would get him nowhere.

"It's borrowed from Sadie. The woman has more clothes than she could possibly ever wear."

Why were they talking about women when what she really wanted to know was how far had he made it with their project.

"A typical woman," he said as he twirled her around on the dance floor as the musicians played.

"How are you doing with our little plan?" she asked.

"Don't want to talk about it here, but it's coming along. We need to meet in the next few days and discuss our strategy. How we're going to do our show. Because that's what this will be, a show."

Nellie danced by them and frowned when she saw Tessa in Seth's arms. That should chap her ass. Tessa moved a little closer and Seth's brow raised.

"Did you recover after drinking whiskey?"

"Of course. As soon as you left, I stopped throwing up," she retorted. Though she would not mention how she felt horrible that night with an extreme headache. Maybe she wasn't cut out to drink hard liquor.

If she were going to join in with men, then she had to enjoy the same pleasures.

He grinned at her. "Why do I get the feeling that was the first time you ever experienced hard liquor?"

"Isn't there some place you need to be?" she asked. "Don't you have some woman here that you're pursuing to defile? I heard an engagement was near. Is that true?"

Shaking his head at her, he stared down into her eyes and a warmth seemed to flow through her. "No, Irene dumped me. First time a woman has ever told me it was over. Usually that's my job."

Tessa smiled. "Sorry, but that must have been shocking, especially to your ego."

"It was. I'm the one who ends our courting. Not the woman."

She had to turn her face away to keep from laughing. When she turned to him again, her lips trembled with laughter. "You must be heartbroken. Devastated. I'm shocked you had the energy to attend tonight's ball."

He twirled her and then mashed her hard against his chest. "Now you're being mean."

"No," she said laughing. "How many women have you ended a

relationship with?"

A frown appeared on his handsome face as his brows lifted. "More than I can remember."

"That's what I thought. You are known around town as a womanizer. I bet she got tired of waiting for your proposal. Exhausted from you trying to convince her to go to bed with you."

A little laugh came from him. "Damn, but you're good. How many men have you courted?"

"None, they're too afraid of my gun. And they know better than to try to worm their way into my bed."

The music ended and they stood on the floor. "Time for you to pursue someone new. Good luck getting into her bed."

She turned, but before she could get away, she felt his hand on her arm.

"What if I wanted to pursue you? What if you were my next conquest?"

Laughter bubbled up from inside her chest. "I'd say you have a death wish. Think about it, you and I facing off on a field after you seduced me with the idea of never offering me marriage. Do you want to die?"

A grin spread across his face. "Maybe you could change me. Maybe I would offer to marry you."

"Have you lost your mind? We hate each other. You don't want to marry me. You're just lonely and in need of a woman. Go find someone who your sister would approve of and will fall for your phony lines. That woman is not me."

With a yank of her arm, she walked away and noticed that most of the guests had been watching them. In the corner, she saw Mrs. Griffin, the newspaper gossip, laughing and whispering to Nellie as she walked off the floor.

All she wanted to do was disappear.

Carrie Miller appeared at her side. "You know he's flirting with you, don't you?"

The blonde was one of the women who ran with Nellie, and she was loud and obnoxious, but she did Nellie's evil bidding without a thought.

"Really?" Tessa acted surprised. "Why would he want a woman like me?"

The girl rolled her eyes and nodded her agreement. So everyone thought she was too ugly to be with Seth. And she probably was.

“Good question,” Carrie said. “I think it’s the guns. Some men get excited when they shoot their weapons.”

That was something that Tessa tried not to think about. The thought of a man getting excited was way more than this virgin could handle. Seth was a womanizer and didn't deserve to have a woman chasing after him.

“You know,” Tessa said, “I think you should go after him. He’s lonely since Irene ended their courtship. He’s needing comforting and you’re just the woman who could give him what he wants.”

The blonde smiled. “If he would put a ring on my finger, I’d give him my magical pussy every day.”

Tessa was trying to keep it together to not laugh her butt off. Magical pussy? Wow, she had never heard it described that way before and she didn’t have a clue if hers was magical, but she rather doubted it.

“Now’s your chance.”

“I’m going for it,” Carrie said and hurried over to where Seth was leaning against a table.

When Carrie walked up, his eyes met Tessa’s and she smiled and blew him a kiss to let him know that she’d sent the woman to him.

“Just what in the hell do you think you’re doing?” Nellie asked as she walked up to Tessa. “Stay away from my brother. You’re just trying to take his winnings.”

“He didn’t win. I did. He just received the compensation because those bastards refused to allow women to enter the competition.”

Nellie smiled. “He won. Get over it. And, no, you’re not going to take his money.”

“Maybe I’ll take his winnings and his heart,” Tessa threatened, knowing that wasn’t possible, but she liked to scare Nellie with the thought.

She gasped.

“You are such a bitch.”

“Whatever for? Your brother is a grown man. He doesn’t need you watching out for him.”

“Stay away from him,” Nellie warned.

Tessa leaned back and smiled. “What are you going to do if I don’t?”

“I’ll ruin you, and you know I can do it. Already Mrs. Griffin is doing an article on how some women don’t know their place in society. And your name will be mentioned.”

A trickle of anger ignited like a fuse, but Tessa was determined to not let that old bitty get to her.

“Well, we all listen to the one woman in town who does her best to be a nosey bitch. I’m shaking in my boots. You might want to mention to her that I’m now staying at Sadie’s home. I’m sure Levi will not be too happy when he sees his fiancée’s friend’s name in the paper.”

Nellie’s eyes widened. “So you’ve joined the Bad Girls’ Club.”

“A bona fide member. And you might want to ask your brother what we have planned. Mrs. Griffin will have something new to talk about.”

Nellie put her hands on her hips. “What are you talking about?”

Tessa gave a little laugh. “Ask Seth. He’s got all the juicy details.” Then she pointed her finger at Nellie like it was a gun and pulled the trigger.

“No, you wouldn’t dare,” she said.

Laughing, Tessa turned and walked away. “Get ready for the battle.”

Unable to resist, she gave a quick glance back to see Nellie stomping off in the direction of her brother who was dancing with Carrie, his expression appeared pained at best.

Time to leave. She had created enough chaos for one night.

## Chapter 8

With a sigh, Seth walked out of the ballroom and down the hall toward the garden area and a breath of fresh air. What he needed was a stiff drink. Tessa had created havoc by sending over Carrie, his sister's friend and cohort. The woman had made it abundantly clear that she wanted him. And she was willing to do whatever she needed to get him.

Problem was he remembered her as a little girl in pigtails that his sister often made cry. The girl was a beauty, but he had no romantic feelings toward her. None. And yet Tessa encouraged her to pursue him. At least, that's Carrie's side of the story.

Stepping outside, he took a deep breath. The only woman he wanted in that ballroom was a five-foot three-inch ball of spitfire that let him know bluntly that they didn't have a chance. And she was right. If he had the opportunity, he probably would have bedded her and then broke it off with the girl.

Needing a few moments to gather his feelings and thoughts, he heard the door open behind him.

"Seth Robinson, what in the hell are you doing?"

It was Nellie. In some ways she reminded him of his father. Bossy, opinionated, and determined to get her way, his sister had a burr up her butt about something. And he had the feeling that Tessa had planted it there.

The woman really was determined to wreak havoc on his night and she was doing a great job.

"I'm enjoying the night air and a break."

"That hussy Tessa is chasing you, isn't she?"

"No, I'm going after her, but she doesn't want anything to do with me."

Nellie's mouth dropped open. "Dear God, why in the world would you pursue her? She's trash."

No, she wasn't trash. But she was everything that Nellie despised in another woman. Especially her independence and the way she didn't care what society thought.

"Because she's beautiful, she's sassy, she's smart and I love the

way she can handle a gun.”

For a moment, his sister stood there shaking her head and staring at him like he’d lost his mind. And maybe he had, because all he could think about was Tessa and that could only bring him more trouble than even he deserved.

“You’re crazy,” she said. “You could have any woman in that ballroom and yet you’ve chosen the one you can’t and should never have.” She paused for a second. “What is this battle she mentioned to me. She said to ask you.”

A little laugh escaped him. “Of course, she did. I can’t talk much about it yet, but we’re planning on meeting once again to see who can outshoot who.”

His sister pushed her long hair off her shoulders and placed her hands on her hips as she stared at him and shook her head.

“This is how she’s going to get that money back,” Nellie said almost growling. “I knew it.”

Seth stared at her amazed at the venom in her voice. “No, we’re going to sell tickets and try to make money. Don’t say anything yet. I’m still working on the plans.”

“She beat you. Why would you take a chance on getting humiliated by her again? Did you learn nothing the first time?”

His sister was almost in his face, her disgust so apparent. But something drew him to Tessa. Something that said take a chance on her. Yes, he could be beaten again, but he might also win.

And they might make lots of money giving the people of Fort Worth a show. All he had to do was get her riled and she would be determined to prove that she was the better marksman. Maybe his skills didn’t matter if in the end they made enough money he could buy his ranch.

Then he would drop Tessa like the impetuous socialite she was.

“Maybe I’m looking to catch something far bigger.”

She frowned at him. “Like what?”

“Earn some money.”

She shook her head “This is not going to go well.”

A cicada sang its lonely song in the summer night. Maybe she was right, but he had to try. What did he have to lose?

“You could be right, but I’m going to give it a try. Whatever you do, please don’t say anything to Papa.”

Just then the sound of the door closing reached his ears. “Don’t say anything to Papa about what? What have you gotten yourself



into now, son?"

Oh, hell. He wasn't ready to hear his father rant at him about his decision. Could he delay in telling him? No, he wasn't going to lie, and if the man didn't like it, then he would take the heat.

"Tessa Harris and I are going to do a show that will showcase our skills as marksman."

His father shook his head and cursed, using words that even Seth didn't like to hear. "I've put up with your shenanigans for years, waiting for you to realize you can't live on your trust fund alone. That right now that money should be going into savings and not you spending every dime of it. But you're too stubborn to listen."

"I'm saving most of my trust fund every month," he said, knowing his father would never acknowledge him being careful with his money. He wanted to believe that he was a spendthrift because he didn't have a regular job. A job his father wanted him to take regardless of his happiness.

His father turned on him, his eyes flashing in the dim light of the garden, his body rigid with anger, and Seth knew he had reached his limits with him.

"Your trust fund will be cut off at the end of this month. You have about two weeks to find a job or you're going to be penniless."

Again, the man didn't want to hear that he had saved money. That almost half of his trust fund went into savings. He didn't drink, much. He didn't gamble, and he seldom ate anywhere but home. All the money he spent was on his guns. Ammunition was his biggest cost and even that he used sparingly.

"If that makes you feel like a good father, then do it," he said. "I earned five hundred dollars on the last competition, and this one, I hope to make even more."

Shaking his head, his father stepped in front of him. "By now, you should be looking for a wife. But I heard that Irene Young's father was relieved that you were no longer courting his daughter. Seems he didn't like the fact you had no job. No way to support his daughter. That would have been an excellent match, but your laziness ended it. Even Irene knew better than to join forces with a man without a job."

Strange that his father would throw that in his face, but then again, it fit all his criteria to make his son feel bad.

"Yes, Irene ended things with me, but I would have soon ended

them with her.”

“No father will want you to court his daughter if you don’t have a way of supporting her. Time to become a man and get a job.”

Seth stepped around his father and stood with his back to him. “If you wanted me to be successful, you could help me purchase the land that I need for a cattle ranch, but you want to tie me to the bank. You want me working a job I would hate.”

“No son of mine will ever be a common man. Working a ranch is for the common folk. You are destined for so much better, and the sooner you start, the sooner you’ll reach the top. You could be running the bank in a few years.”

It was like they were not of the same flesh. It was like he could not fathom how much Seth detested sitting behind a desk. Running a ranch was hard work, but that didn’t make it bad or common. Those men were some of the toughest men he’d ever met.

And he wanted to become one. He wanted to be a successful rancher and would do whatever it took.

“Go ahead. Cut off my trust fund. But believe me when I tell you that I will find a way to purchase the land to own a ranch. Someday soon, I’ll be a cattle rancher. As for finding a wife, maybe I need to find someone who will stand beside me through good times and bad. Someone who will listen to my dreams and desires. Someone unlike my father.”

A hiss of air came his father as the man whirled around and marched out of the garden back into the ballroom.

“Sorry, brother,” Nellie whispered as she laid her hand on his arm and then also returned to the ballroom, leaving him alone.

Damn, why couldn’t the man understand he didn’t want to work behind a desk. He didn’t want to be a banker or a mayor or a lawyer. His dreams were of owning his own ranch. Of being his own boss.

To hell with his father. Now he was more determined than ever to make this Battle of the Sexes work for him and Tessa.

## Chapter 9

Tessa needed to practice. Since she had been fired from the smithery, she had not shot a single time. A good marksman practiced every day. Perfecting the stance, the breathing, and the way the gun was held.

And it was a damn good way to let out some frustration. Last night's ball had been all right until Nellie decided to make trouble, but hopefully, she'd made the woman uncomfortable.

Not that she could ever make her feel truly bad about anything she ever said. No one had that kind of power over Nellie Robinson. No one. Not even her brother Seth. And why would he?

Dancing with him had been fun until he tried to make her think he would seduce her. Why would he cast his interest on an ugly duckling like herself? She was not the type of woman he normally pursued. She wasn't beautiful, she had no prestige, she wasn't wealthy, and she had beat him at the shooting match. There was no reason for him to try to court her unless he thought he could convince her to let him win or get into her bloomers.

Her bloomers would remain securely waist high.

Yet, she also felt kind of bad for what she'd done to him last night. Sending over Carrie to flirt and convince him to court her. The woman was beautiful and wasn't that the kind of girl he desired?

She might be lacking in the cerebral front, but she had the right body parts. Something Tessa lacked.

Tessa's curves never made it to the well-rounded or overflowing bodice stage. She was still more of the small, dainty, and flat chested variety.

And her family was not wealthy like his other conquests. There was no money for the families to meld together and the thought of Nellie as her sister-in-law was nauseating.

She pulled her horse to a halt in the meadow. Here was a place she liked to practice that was far enough away from town that she didn't worry about shooting someone. It was down in a creek bed and her bullets would slam into the high walls of the little river.

Sliding off her horse, she ground tethered him and then emptied out her bullets into a sack. Before her ammunition had cost her no money, but now she would need to purchase whatever she used.

Pulling out her .45 Colt pistol, she loaded the barrel before carefully following the path down into the creek bed. Right in the bend of the river, she could fire her weapons without fear of hitting someone.

The creek gurgled along only about three inches deep during the hot summer months. It was a quiet, peaceful place until she began her practice.

She raised her pistol and aimed at the target she had nailed into the dirt wall weeks ago. *Slam*. The bullet hit the wall. *Bam*. She hit the same spot over and over.

This was what she liked about being an expert marksman. With every bullet, she cleared her mind, steadied her breathing, and pulled the trigger, holding the gun steady. The faces of her frustrations were on the target, and one by one, she rid herself of the angst they caused her.

"Nice shooting," a voice called.

Whirling around, she held the gun in front of her.

"Hey, don't shoot me," Seth said.

Stunned to see Seth walking toward her, knowing he was one of her frustrations, she growled. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to practice, just like you," he said.

"Did you follow me?"

"No, this is where I normally practice," he said.

"Me too," she replied thinking it odd they had never seen each other here before.

Being together was not a good idea. Wouldn't this just fuel the gossips if they learned they were out here together, alone and firing their guns. Wouldn't that just make her father even angrier. But then again, he didn't believe any man would be interested in his daughter.

She was too ugly.

"No, we shouldn't be here alone, practicing like this," she said.

"Why not? I thought afterwards we could talk about the show," he said with a grin.

Why did he have to be so damn devilishly handsome? When he smiled like that at her, she felt her heart hammer a little harder in her chest. This was not what she needed today. Seth was not what

she needed today.

“We can talk about that in town,” she said.

That blasted show that even now she wondered if she’d made the right decision. But if she didn’t earn some money soon, she would have to go crawling back to her father. Not what she wanted to do.

“Are you afraid I’m going to steal your secrets?”

She rolled her eyes at him, turned, and went back to lining up her pistol with the target. *Bam.* The bullet hit the dirt.

“The only secret I have about guns is that I’m going to win our Battle of the Sexes. That’s why I’m here practicing.”

“And the reason I’m here as well. To prove once and for all that I can beat you,” he said with that same grin.

She turned and tilted her head, looking at him, suddenly curious. “Maybe we should make a side bet. Say one hundred dollars of our own money.”

“No,” he said.

In a way, she was glad that he said no because her funds were not rich and that would take a lot of her cash.

“It should be that if I win, you have to have dinner with me,” he said.

Oh dear God, was he going to start that again? The man was not attracted to her, only what was inside her bloomers.

“I’m not the woman for you. In fact, I would just be another conquest. You like the thrill of the chase and once a woman says yes, then you’re onto the next one.”

She turned back to the target and lined up her next shot.

“That’s really harsh,” he said. “You’re right, I like women. I like courting them, but maybe there has not been one that I thought would last with me forever. The last woman dumped me.”

“Smart girl,” she said.

He took a step beside her and lined up to fire his pistol. *Bam.* The bullet slammed into the dirt wall where once there had been a target.

“You need a new target,” he said.

“I’m not willing to cross the river and put one up on the wall. Besides, I don’t have one now that I’ve been fired.”

“How about every time we hit the place where the target is, we call out the name of someone who drives us to spend time at target practice,” he said.

She stared at him, surprised. "That's what I do when I'm alone. How did you know?"

A chuckle came from him, and he leaned down close to her. "Because that's what I do. It's the way I get rid of my frustration."

"Me too," she cried. "How can I trust you to keep my secrets?"

"Well, you'll know my secrets as well."

"That's true," she said.

"I'll go first," he said as he lined up aimed. "Papa. I'm not a banker." He took a deep breath steadied his aim and fired. The bullet hit where the target once was.

"Your turn," he said, stepping back.

"Papa, why didn't you take my side or understand me," she said, taking aim and firing her weapon.

"We seem to have a problem with our fathers," he said.

"Yes," she replied, wondering how he would feel when his name was mentioned. "Your turn."

"Nellie," he said, shocking her "Why are you always the favored one?" He took aim and fired.

She could see that. In her family, her brothers were more favored. They could do no wrong. And everyone in town knew what Nellie wanted, she got.

"Nellie," she said, raising her arm and taking aim "Why are you so mean? Why did you reveal me in front of the whole town?"

A chuckle came from Seth. "That she is."

She was surprised that he didn't defend his sister and even agreed with her that she could be mean.

"Tessa," he said, pointing the gun at the target. "Why are you so much better than me?"

After he fired, she faced him. "Because I practice a lot."

She raised her gun. "Seth, why did you have to win the prize money I wanted. And why are you pursuing me when we both know I'm not what you want."

The gun roared as she fired it and then he pushed her arm down and pulled her into his arms.

"There is a sweet innocence about you that intrigues me. It's like you're what I shouldn't have, and yet I want you. You're not my usual type of woman; you're more interesting."

His mouth covered hers and Tessa felt like her knees suddenly couldn't hold her. His lips were gentle and demanding, and so very delicious. Before Seth, no man had ever kissed her and she knew

that as much as she tried to deny it, she felt the attraction between them too.

Suddenly her arms looped up around his neck, her pistol still in her hand.

He pulled back. "I know you're a fine markswoman, but it makes me a little nervous to have a pistol in your hand while I'm kissing you."

She grinned. "It should. One wrong move and it could be your last."

Stepping back, she unwrapped from around him. "Maybe we should stick with target practice."

"Maybe so," he said. "Though I did enjoy that kiss and would have liked for it to last even longer, but not with a gun around my neck."

"It kept you honest," she replied as she walked away, ready to continue practicing.

"By the way, we have the field a week from today."

Tessa turned and stared at him, her heart fluttering inside her chest. Would this show only make her look more foolish or would it prove once and for all she was the better markswoman?

"Guess we better get to practicing," she said. "Because I plan on winning."

"And so do I," he said, lifting his pistol and taking aim at the target.

# Chapter 10

Tessa sat in her room at Sadie's home, trying to keep her emotions in check and preparing herself mentally for tomorrow's show. Her biggest fear was making herself look even more ridiculous to the people of Fort Worth.

After all, the last time she and Seth had competed, she'd been disguised as a man. But tomorrow, she was wearing a new outfit with a split skirt, a vest, and a new hat. Her boots were still the same, but she had polished them until they almost reflected the sunlight.

This ugly duckling was going to look her best if she was to be the laughing stock of Fort Worth.

A knock sounded on the door.

"Tessa, your father is here to see you," Sadie called. "What should I tell him?"

Her father had come to visit her? Was he here to tell her he was sorry and to wish her well tomorrow? Oh, how she'd missed her papa and even her mother and most especially her brothers.

"I'll be right down," she said.

Quickly, she jumped up from the bed, splashed her face with water, brushed her curls and then slowly walked down the stairs to Sadie's parlor.

When she walked in, Sadie was talking to him while he sat waiting. He stood when she entered the room. His hat was in his hand, and when he gazed at her, she imagined she saw tears welling in his eyes.

"Papa, is everything all right?" She worried that something might have happened to her mother and the boys. Why would he come alone? She sank down next to Sadie on the couch.

"Everyone is fine," he said. "Your mother refused to come with me. She said to leave you alone, but I had to speak with you. You have to know the truth."

Sadie stood. "Excuse me. Let me know if you need anything."

With a whirl of her peach skirts, Sadie left the room, and Tessa was sad to see her go. With her friend here, she knew her father



would control his anger. Not that she was certain he was angry. She didn't know how he felt at this moment as she tried to read his face.

"What about? Is this about the Battle of the Sexes? You made your feelings rather clear several weeks ago when I entered the competition as a man."

"You have to think of others. Do you know how many people mentioned you the next day in the store? Asking me how I felt about my daughter dressing like a man to compete. Telling me I hadn't been strict enough with you. Your mother blaming me for letting you work in the smithery instead of staying home and learning needlepoint."

There it was laid out what was expected of their daughter. She should not be shooting guns but stabbing a needle through a piece of cloth.

"I don't want to learn needlepoint. I've considered taking up knitting, just because I'd have another weapon to use."

He shook his head. "I'm here to beg you not to go through with this competition. Battle of the Sexes? Really, my daughter knows better. This is not something a woman should engage in. They are going to make so much fun of you and I don't want that to happen. And your brothers will be bullied in school. Already, Ardem came home with a black eye from getting in a fight over you."

Her heart broke. She didn't want her brothers to be punished because of her actions, but what was she doing wrong? Invading a man's competition? What if she could shoot better than most men?

And there lie the rub. They didn't want the world to know that a woman could outshoot a man, because then why would they need men?

"We've sold tickets. We have it all planned. There is no way I can back out, and I don't want to. I'm sorry that Ardem got into a fight at school over me. But I'm not backing out. Once and for all, I want people to understand that I'm the better markswoman."

Her father stood and began to pace the floor. "What will that gain you? Do you really think people care that you can shoot better than Seth?"

It wasn't the people of Fort Worth that she cared about, but she was hoping that somehow this would get to Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and that she would receive an opportunity to be in his show.

But she couldn't tell her father her dreams because she feared he would only laugh at her. He wanted her dreams to be of marrying a

husband and having a family. She wanted more.

“Is this some grand scheme of yours to try to get Seth to court you?”

What? Did they believe that she would be so desperate for a man that she would compete against him to make him like her? That didn’t make a bit of sense.

“No,” she almost yelled, thinking what he would do if he ever found out the man had kissed her. “Why is it wrong for a woman to be competitive? Why can’t I win a championship?”

“Because women are to stay home, get married, have children, and take care of the home,” he said. “And you’re breaking the norms.”

“And my family doesn’t like it when I break the norms,” she replied.

“It doesn’t help my business,” her father said. “In fact, it’s killing the smithery.”

Stunned, she stared at him as he sank back down in a chair. “So you want me to give up my dreams to save the business? And why would your customers care what I do?”

“Because they fear their daughters will be rebellious like mine,” he said. “I’m begging you, for your mother and your brothers’ sake, don’t do this. End this silly competition.”

Finally, he’d said the one thing that got to her. Already she could feel the doubts of her decision overwhelming her. How could she do this to her family? If they lost the business, how could her father take care of them?

“You’ve got to stop this nonsense, so I don’t lose more customers.”

She sighed. “We have sold so many tickets. We’d have to return the money.”

He didn’t say anything but picked up his hat that he had laid on the chair, stood and walked to the door. “We miss you at home. Your mother cries at night because she feels like she’s lost you. End this nonsense and come home.”

Rising, she followed him to the door. With a sigh, he put his hat on his head and left. Tessa stood there, not knowing what to think. What did she do now?

Sadie walked in. “Everything all right?”

“No, he said that if I compete tomorrow, he will lose his business. How can I do that to my family?”

Sadie shook her head. "I don't understand. What does his business have to do with you?"

"He says that his customers fear their daughters will become rebellious like me and that I've got to stop."

Sadie took her hand and led her to the sofa. There they sat across from one another. Her friend, her confidant, stared at her with sadness in her eyes, knowing her father had put her in a terrible position.

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. We've sold tickets. We've got everything prepared, and if I stop now, then what will this do to Seth? We'll have to pay back the money to the ticket holders. Everyone is coming to watch us compete."

Tessa couldn't even imagine telling Seth that she wasn't going to be there tomorrow. Already she could see the disappointment on his face.

Who did she disappoint? Seth or her family? Or even worse, herself.

# Chapter 11

The morning of the Battle of the Sexes, Seth had never felt more nervous. Not only because he was one of the stars, but because this event could make them both a lot of money. Money he could use to buy his land.

And prove once and for all who was the better marksman. Him.

A knock on his bedroom door had him swinging it open to see his sister. “This just came for you.” She handed him an envelope then remained in place, being nosy.

“Thank you,” he said and closed the door.

With her gone, he opened the paper and read the note.

“Hell no,” he yelled. How could Tessa do this to him. Especially less than two hours before the competition started.

He grabbed his guns, everything he needed, and ran out his bedroom. Oh no, she was not getting away with making him look like the biggest fool in the state of Texas. Now was not the time to back out.

Nellie and his father stared at him as he ran through the house and out the front. Sadie didn’t live far, and he could reach there faster by running than getting his horse.

In a matter of moments, he was pounding on Sadie’s door. “Tessa, let me in. We need to talk, now.”

Sadie came to the door and frowned at him. “Be gentle on her. She’s had a rough night.”

A rough night? They would have a rough year if they cancelled this event after all the buildup. The posters were all over town, the paper had done an article on them. There was no backing out now.

Ringling her hands, Tessa walked into the parlor where he paced.

“I’m sorry. I can’t do this.”

“Why?”

“My father says he will lose his business. That his customers have been upset about how I tried to win the competition before. If I do this, his business might have to close.”

Seth stood there shaking his head. “No. It’s not true. The place was packed when I was in there the other day. Your brother Ardem

was working behind the counter because your father could not keep up.”

Her brows drew together in a frown, and she sank down onto a sofa. “You’re sure?”

“Yes,” he said. “Who told you this?”

“My father,” she said.

“I’ll prove it to you. Give me thirty minutes. Be ready to go when I get back.”

“Yes,” she said, her sapphire eyes filled with confusion.

Seth hurried out the door. He hailed a cab to take him to Tessa’s family home. He walked around back and knocked on the door. He was in luck when her younger brother, Cole, opened the door.

“Yes,” the boy said.

“I need to speak with Ardem. Is he home?” he asked.

“Ardem,” the boy yelled. “Come down here.”

Lord, he hoped the parents were either doing something else or weren’t at home, because when they saw him, they would know his reason for being here.

“Yes,” Ardem said, coming into view.

“Your sister has some questions for you. Can you come with me?”

“Sure,” he said.

“I promise I’ll get you back home,” Seth said.

“I’m going too,” Cole replied. “You’re not leaving me out.”

“Come on,” Seth said. “We’ve got to hurry.”

They walked out the door and he hurried them around to the front of the house where he hailed a cab back to Sadie’s home.

“What’s this about, mister?” Ardem asked.

“I’m Seth Robinson,” he said, thinking he should have told them that before they left the house.

“You’re that fella Tessa is supposed to have a competition with today,” Cole said.

The kid was no dummy. The cab moved through the streets at a brisk pace, but it was all Seth could do not to scream at the man to hurry.

They turned the corner to Sadie’s house.

“Wow,” Cole replied. “Look at that mansion.”

“Our sister is staying here?” Ardem replied.

Seth liked her brothers. They were eager, young boys, but already he could see the beginnings of manhood starting to show on

their faces. He hoped that they loved their sister as much as he loved his.

They jumped out of the cab and Seth climbed out and paid the man. "Please wait on us and you'll earn that much or more."

The man nodded and they all but ran to the front door where he knocked.

Tessa answered and her eyes grew wide when she saw her brothers. "Ardem and Cole." She threw her arms around them. "What are you doing here?"

"Wow, what a house," Cole said.

"When I went to pick up Ardem, Cole insisted on coming," Seth said.

They walked inside and Cole gawked at the big house. "I guess your friend Sadie is rich."

"Cole," Tessa admonished, "it's not nice to say such things."

"Well, it's true," the boy said.

"We've got to hurry," Seth said, anxiety sending his heart into a wild stampede. The event started in less than an hour. If Tessa backed out, he didn't know what he was going to do.

"Why did you bring my brothers?" Tessa asked.

"Ardem, you need to tell your sister the truth. Is the smithery in bad financial shape?"

The boy glanced at him like he was crazy. "No. The week of your first competition, business exploded with people coming in to talk to Tessa. But she wasn't there, so Papa brought me in for people to talk to and for me to help. We've been busier than ever before. They all want to learn to shoot like Tessa."

Tessa sank down onto the couch. "But Papa said he might have to close the business because of me."

Ardem sighed and shook his head. "Momma told him to say that to you, so that you wouldn't do your next competition. She's been real upset at Papa that you're not a proper young woman."

Cole laughed. "Yeah, Papa's been in trouble for teaching you how to shoot a gun."

"I was ten years old," she said. "And at the time, she approved."

Her brothers shrugged. "They've been fighting something fierce," Ardem said.

Seth felt bad for Tessa and he hated what he had to do. But they were running out of time, and he needed her answer now.

"So what is your decision, Tessa? Are you going to back out?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Oh, hell no. A woman needs to win this competition just to show you men that you can't get away with lies and that we're just as capable."

It was all Seth could do to keep from grabbing her and kissing her, but then again, that might not be the right thing to do in front of her brothers. Thank goodness Ardem loved her enough to tell her the truth.

Seth smiled. "That's my girl. Let's go."

"What about us?" Cole said.

"You're going too," Tessa said. "You're going to watch your big sister take home the prize money."

"Not if I can help it," Seth said. "Let's go."

# Chapter 12

When they arrived at the competition field, he noticed that all the stadium seats were filled. They had a full audience and some people were trying to sit along the edge of the arena. Over two thousand tickets had been sold.

“Thank God, you’re here,” Nellie said. “I was beginning to think you’d backed out.”

“Problems came up,” he said, not wanting to divulge to her how Tessa’s father had tried to convince her to back out.

“Are the judges all set up?”

“Yes,” she said.

They had appointed two men and a woman to make the final decision on who won and who lost.

A tent had been set up for him and Tessa to prepare, get a drink, or even change clothes. While he’d been gone making certain that everything was ready, Tessa had put on the new clothes she bought to wear for this event. The split skirt, ruffled blouse, and hat made her look exceptionally nice.

But no matter what, he couldn’t let her win.

He took the time to check his guns, prepare his ammunition, and then a few minutes to calm his nerves.

While he was taking deep breaths with his eyes closed, she walked up beside him. She didn’t say a word and he realized they both were mentally prepared.

When he opened his eyes, she was staring at him. “Are we ready?”

For some reason, he wanted to kiss her. Hold her and just make certain that everything was going to be all right, but he resisted.

“Yes, let’s get this started,” he replied.

“May the best marksman win,” she answered.

A grin spread across his face. “Yes, and that’s me.”

They walked out of the tent into the center of the grassy area and the crowd roared. Some were chanting his name and some Tessa’s. It was odd to hear his name hollered from a crowd.

They had hired a professional announcer and the man welcomed



everyone to the competition. "Let's get started. Let the Battle of the Sexes begin."

"Good luck," he said and shook her hand.

"May the best woman win," she replied.

They turned back-to-back with their guns raised.

"Don't accidentally miss the target," Seth said loud enough he hoped the crowd could hear.

"Oh, don't worry, honey, I only missed the target twice when I practiced this. Sadly, one man died and the other one is in the hospital. But he's going to live."

The crowd roared with laughter and they began their count off and when they reached ten, they twirled and fired a shot at a target over the other person's shoulder.

Bam. Tessa hit hers dead on.

Bam. Seth was off just a little, but not much.

"You're still alive," Tessa called. "Damn, I was hoping I'd miss."

"Well, sugar, you're going to have to try harder," he said. "What do the judges say?"

They held up their cards and Tessa won that round easily.

"Now let's get down to business with the targets. Uh, ladies or semi-ladies first."

"I'm no semi, sugar. I'm a full-blooded woman who likes guns. Anyone want to court me?" she called to the crowd.

"I will," some stupid man said on the back row. "Without the guns."

"Not happening," she said. She held her gun up. "Best courting device ever. Guaranteed to help a man keep his hands in the right places."

The crowd laughed.

Then she turned and fired five rapid shots at a target, taking out the center.

"Very nice," Seth said. "Maybe I should make a circle around your circle."

He fired off five shots, and the target paper fluttered to the ground where he had cut a round hole.

"Look at you doing circles," Tessa said surprised. "I bet you and your horse do circles all the time." Again, she had the crowd laughing and enjoying the show. "I know you like to circle women. Every time one tries to get you to marry, you do the circle dance farther and farther away from her."

He frowned at her. "No, I don't do circles. I run."

The crowd laughed.

"Get back to shooting. I'd say that I won that round. What do the judges say?"

They held up cards with Tessa's number on it. Two to nothing. This wasn't going Seth's way.

"I'm sure you can do better," Tessa said. "I'll even let you go first."

Seth lay on the ground and propped his rifle onto his shoulder. He took a deep breath and let the crowd noise completely die away before he held his breath and pulled the trigger.

*Boom.* Five shots later, the target was completely obliterated. The black circle was gone.

"Beat that," he said.

"That's some mighty fine shooting. Maybe I should do what you did to my target and shoot a circle around it?"

"Go ahead," he teased her.

"Nah, I want a new target, then we're going to compare the circles when we finish. If mine is bigger, then I won this round."

He shook his head at her. "No way you can beat me."

Seth watched as she moved to the ground. She placed the rifle against her shoulder and then she took several deep steadying breaths.

*Boom.* Five shots later, he was amazed that the target had been obliterated. The judges came down onto the field and held the two targets up. It was so close. And yet this time, his target showed more paper missing. He'd won his first round.

A sigh of relief overcame him. It was two to one.

Damn, that was three rounds. But there were two to go. And this next one had the most points—a freestyle fancy shooting trick. And his trick was a good one.

"I'll let you go first," he said. "After all, your sex is the weaker one."

She turned and faced him with her pistol in her hand. He knew it wasn't loaded, but still.

"You want to talk to a woman about being the weaker sex when she has a gun in her hand? You want to call women the weaker sex when we expel six-pound babies from our bodies? How about you birth a babe."

The crowd roared with laughter.

"I don't birth babies. I just help make them," he said.

Shaking her head, she smiled at him. "Back to shooting. Show me your manly trick. I'm sure it's one that is going to dazzle us."

A smile crossed his face. "You bet it is."

The helpers set up the watermelon on a table. With his six-shooter, he carefully quartered the watermelon.

When he was finished, he turned to her. "Would you like a bite?"

"Sure," she said and walked over and ate a piece of the fruit.

"Now, let me show you a real trick," she said.

Her brother entered the arena with a cigar in his mouth.

Seth felt fear explode inside him. What was she doing? She was taking a huge risk with her brother's life.

She took a blindfold and put it over his eyes. "So he doesn't jerk."

Then she lifted her pistol and fired a shot. The cigar exploded not far from the boy's lips.

Relief filled Seth. If they did this again, that would never happen. She was not going to risk someone's life for a trick.

She reached over and hugged Ardem who then trotted off the field.

"That was crazy," he said.

"You're not confident in your abilities?"

"Of course, I am, but you just risked your brother's life," he said.

"Would you rather hold my target?" she asked.

"No, I would not," he said.

"Then trust me. It worked."

The judges gave her that point which technically had her winning, but they decided to go ahead and do one more stunt together.

The helpers would throw a can into the air and then they would shoot at it. Seth hit five and Tessa hit four.

"I beat you on the last one," he said. "That makes it three to two."

"Yes, you did, but did you win the competition?"

"No."

The announcer came on. "In the Battle of the Sexes, it seems Tessa has won. Women are the better marksman."

She waved to the crowd. Some applauded and some booed. They had wanted Seth to win and suddenly he felt anxious. What had

they done? Could he have made her a target for some crazy man to prove to her that he was a better shot? He would need to stay close to her for the next few days.

Yes, it upset him that he'd lost, but he couldn't complain. He had made nearly a thousand dollars, which took him one step closer to buying the land for his ranch.

They took their bows and then he swept her into his arms and laid a kiss on her right there in front of everyone.

The crowd went wild and Tessa went limp in his arms.

# Chapter 13

The next day, Tessa sat and gazed out at Sadie's garden. She had won the competition. But everything didn't seem wonderful like she'd expected. What was she going to do now?

Her family situation was even worse than before. Last night, people had not respected her like she thought. In fact, she'd received two challenges from men wanting to show her that they could beat her.

Seth had kissed her when it was over, but later, he'd been distant like he couldn't take the fact that she had beat him. Yes, she was competitive, and no, she was not going to throw a match just to make him happy.

But the biggest thing was what did she do now? Where did her life go from here?

As much as she didn't want to admit it, she missed Seth. But now there was no reason for them to continue seeing each other.

Certainly, he would never court her. He might kiss her, but she was not going to be the type of woman he wanted, no matter how much she tried. He liked women who were wealthy and beautiful and acted like spoiled rich girls.

The ugly duckling would never turn into a swan or a debutante.

Tessa didn't have a debutante bone in her body. Somehow she had missed out on that particular trait. She was more like a tomboy ready to get into trouble. Only now the trouble seemed to have ruined her.

What did she do with her life now?

A knock sounded at the home's front door and she opened it to see Seth.

"Hey," he said.

She reached out and hugged him. "God, I've been missing you all day."

"Me?"

"Yes, what do I do now?"

A grin spread across his face. "And here I thought you were hugging me because you were so attracted to me. I was thrilled at

the chance there could be something between us.”

She was, but she couldn't let him see how he affected her. Because he would never accept a woman like her. All she would do was get her heart broken.

The womanizer would never want the ugly duckling.

“Did you read the front page article in the paper this morning?” he asked. “They loved our event and wanted us to do a second one.”

How could they do another one? Hadn't they already proven that she was the best? Why keep rehashing the same old thing?

“No, I don't think so,” she said. “It would get boring if we kept doing it.”

He plopped onto a couch nearby. “You're right. I brought you your money.”

From his pocket, he pulled out an envelope. The money would tide her over until whatever happened next. Sooner or later, she had to find something that dealt with guns to keep herself occupied.

“Have you heard from your father,” he asked her.

“No, how about you?”

“He shook his head and asked me how much money I made.”

“Did you tell him?”

“No,” Seth said smiling. “I wanted to keep him guessing.”

They sat there for a few minutes in silence, like they wanted to be together, but didn't have anything to talk about.

“What are you going to do now?” she asked, wondering if there was something she could do with him. Why did this feel like they were meant to work together?

He sighed. “I don't know.”

“Me either,” she said. “I'm glad I won, but this feels like such a letdown. It's over. Now what?”

“I know,” he said. “Want to go for a ride? I feel the need to go take a look at my dreams.”

She glanced at him.

“I'd like to show you some property,” he said.

Why not. What did she have to lose? “Let's go,” she said. “Let me change into my riding skirt.” A few minutes later, she came running downstairs. Sadie had offered a horse that she could ride and together they went into the barn. He helped her saddle the animal and into the stirrups, and then he led her around to the front of the house where he climbed onto his horse.

It felt right to be riding side by side down the street. There was

an ease between them that shocked her. An ease that felt natural. Maybe they could be friends. Just not lovers.

He turned to head out of town, and she followed, riding alongside him. "Where are we going?"

"To a piece of property I'm looking at," he said. "It's not far. Close enough to get to town quickly, but far enough out, that I can run cattle."

A smile crossed her face. "I've never thought of you as a rancher, but it does seem to fit."

"No banker," he said. "My father is still pushing the idea of me becoming a stuffy desk employee."

She laughed and amazingly the day seemed much brighter. Gazing at him, she understood why women were always clamoring for him to court them and why they risked everything to become his wife.

His brilliant smile and the way his dark eyes twinkled with merriment. How many hearts had he broken?

Suddenly he pulled his horse to a halt and slid his leg over the side. "We're here." He came around and helped her alight from her horse. The man was always a gentleman. How could she not like him?

But she had to remember she had no wealth, she was not beautiful, and they were competing rivals. There was no chance of them ever coming together.

He took her hand and led her through a field of grass to a creek.

"We should have brought a picnic," he said.

What man thought of a picnic and what they should bring? Seth was everything she had hoped for in a man, but she still believed he would only break her heart. The man was a top-notch womanizer.

"That would have been nice," she replied, wondering if this was where he brought women to seduce them.

They walked to the edge of the water. "This will be a great river to catch fish, teach my children to swim, and water my cattle."

"Yes," she said, her imagination suddenly going wild as she envisioned everything he spoke of. "And the house should sit up on the bluff, looking down. That way when the spring rains flood the creek, it won't reach the house. This is my dream," he said softly, staring off at the land as if he could imagine cattle roaming the fields.

A smile crossed his face as he turned to her. He placed his

hands on her face, cupping her cheeks, staring into her eyes. A slight brush of heat spiraled through her at his touch.

He gazed at her. "It hit me hard that you beat me a second time. But then I realized if I had not been in these competitions with you, we would not have learned more about one another. All morning long, I debated on whether to see you. But there was something that said go visit Tessa. And here we are."

"Yes," she said, feeling like her knees were putty. Her breath was heavy. All she wanted was to feel and taste his lips again. One more time and then she could stop. Then she could say it was over.

"Kiss me," she whispered, needing him so very badly.

A groan escaped him as his lips descended. His mouth covered hers, his tongue teasing relentlessly until she let him in. If she kissed another man, would it feel the same? Would there be this tension? This need, she wanted so much more with him.

He pulled her tightly against him and she could feel his hard cock pressed against her. A groan escaped her, and she suddenly realized why so many women fell for his charms. But he would never fall for her.

She pushed against him, fear overwhelming her at the way her body reacted to his kisses.

"I need to get home," she said breathlessly, trying to protect her heart from the pain she knew he could inflict.

"Tessa," he whispered against her head, still holding her close. "Do you realize what you do to me?"

How many women had he said that exact phrase to? She had to remain strong, or risk being hurt so badly, she feared she would never recover.

She pushed out of his arms. "I can't. Please, let's go."

Frowning, they walked back to the horses where he helped her up into the saddle.

They were rivals, competitors. Everything was wrong with this romance, and yet, she'd never been so drawn to a man before.



# Chapter 14

The next morning, Seth received a note from a Mr. Harry Walcott saying he would like to have dinner with him. The note said he had a business proposition.

What did Seth have to lose? It was either find another business to get involved in or become a banker and he did not want to work behind a desk.

The man asked to meet him at the Griffin Hotel in the restaurant. He dressed in his finest suit and when he walked out the door, Nellie stopped him in the hall.

“Where are you going all dressed up? Meeting Tessa for dinner?”

Sometimes his sister could be a nosy bitch. And he wasn’t going to tell her anything. Make her wish she knew what was going on in his life.

“None of your business,” he told Nellie as he hurried down the stairs. At the bottom, his father glanced up at him.

“That suit would look very good on you when you go to the bank interview on Friday.”

“I never agreed to any interview,” he said, fear cascading through him. What had his father done?

“I arranged one for you. You can thank me later,” his father said, going back to his paper.

Anger roared through him, but he made himself continue on. He didn’t know what tonight was about, but he knew damn good and well that he would not be working at the bank.

No matter what his father planned, he would never sit behind a desk all day long and slowly wither and die. He might be very busy on Friday and somehow miss this all important interview.

He hurried out the door and took a cab to the hotel. After he paid the driver, he glanced down the street at Hell's Half Acre. The place where men went to drink, gamble, and find a whore. The noise was already growing.

When he stepped through the doors of the elegant restaurant, he was shocked to see Tessa sitting with a strange man. Who was that? Was she also invited to this meeting or was she seeing someone

new? Oddly, the man didn't look like someone she would consider courting.

Stepping up to the podium, he spoke to the concierge. "I'm looking for a Mr. Walcott."

"Right this way. He's expecting you," the man said as he walked him to the table where Tessa sat.

An older man with dark hair and round glasses stood, his frame a little on the heavy side. "Seth Robinson, I'm Harry Walcott. Now that you're here we can begin."

The man signaled over the waiter, and they ordered drinks.

Seth glanced at Tessa. She looked stunning in a ruby red dress that hung off her shoulders, her blonde curls glowed in the light. The bodice dipped to show a small amount of her bosom. For a moment, he felt jealousy.

Why in the world did she never dress like this for him?

But then again, when had they ever gone to dinner? All they had done was work at being competitors and rivals, never as friends or lovers.

"The reason I'm here is I saw your show the other day. Quite a performance. The Battle of the Sexes. Loved it."

"Thank you," Tessa said.

"Yes, thank you," Seth said, wishing he could take Tessa somewhere and remove that dress inch by inch. Staring at her, it was hard to concentrate on what the man was saying.

The man smiled at them both. "Have you ever heard of Walcott's Western Medicine Show?"

They glanced at each other, their interest suddenly piqued. He was amazed that he felt he could read her thoughts. Was she also wondering why they were here and what did a western show have to do with them?

"No," Seth said.

"No," Tessa replied. "I've never been to a show like that. Tell me about it."

He grinned. "I've been doing this for the past twenty years. At first, we just sold elixirs to help people, but in the last ten years, we've turned into more of a western show where people have acts like yours."

After taking a sip of water, he continued. "We have an acrobatics group, a horse show where a man does tricks on the back of the horse, a magician who does sleight of hand and a lady who

works with animals. Mainly snakes and dogs. A trapeze family and a bicycle group.”

They nodded their heads and Seth began to feel excited. Could it be this Walcott man was going to ask them to perform with his group?

“Like I said, I’ve been in business for twenty years and I’d like to add your act to my show. I’m willing to give you a percentage of the ticket sales minus expenses. It normally works out to be around a hundred dollars a month. We do three shows a week in a different city every week.”

Seth glanced at Tessa. Her eyes were large, and he saw she was intrigued. “So we would do exactly what we did in front of everyone for your show?”

“Yes, though I would need to cut it from five events to three. Loved the duel, so we’d keep that one, the tricks, and one target. And I want the two of you to be going at each other nonstop. That’s what the audience really enjoyed—the two of you taunting one another.”

They stared at each other and Seth felt her foot run along his leg. A grin spread across his face. Not only would they be competing, but they would be together on the road.

“Mr. Walcott, could we increase that money to one hundred fifty dollars each?”

He frowned.

“I tell you what. I’ll go as high as one hundred and twenty-five a month and if you sell out six cities, then we’ll raise it to a hundred fifty.”

They grinned at each other. They would make their show so good that it would sell out in every city.

“Are you in?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Tessa.

“Yes,” said Seth.

They were going to go join the western show and put their act on for an audience.

“Let’s celebrate, and then day after tomorrow, we leave for Kansas City to catch up with the rest of the show. Can you be ready to leave by then?”

Nodding, they smiled at one another.

They raised their glasses. “To Kansas City and joining the show.”

The three of them clicked their glasses and smiled. Seth had

found a way to make enough money to purchase his land. And Tessa would be right there by his side.

Somewhere along the road, he hoped to do more than just kiss her. Somewhere, he wanted to make her his woman.

# Chapter 15

I'm leaving," Tessa said as she walked through the door later that night and saw Sadie sitting on the sofa, reading a book.

The woman glanced up, her eyes widened, and she moved over on the couch. "Come, sit down and tell me what's going on. After the contest with Seth, I didn't think you'd be going anywhere."

At the mention of how she beat Seth, a smile crossed her face. They didn't have much chance to talk this evening after they left the restaurant, but she was anxious to discuss with him their plans on how to make the show even better.

She sat next to Sadie and grinned. "I'm so excited. This is going to be a great thing for me."

"What happened?" Sadie asked.

"That day that we held the contest, a Mr. Harry Walcott was in the audience. He has a western and medicine show that travels the United States putting on performances. He wants to include me and Seth in his show."

Sadie leaned back against the sofa in shock. "What? You're going to compete against Seth every night in a western show?"

Tessa still felt a thrill every time she thought about the chance to prove her marksmanship ability. This was what she had dreamed of. But instead of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, it would be Mr. Walcott's show. That would do for now, but eventually, she hoped she would be asked to perform in Buffalo Bill's.

"Well, not every night, but we're going to join his western show and travel the United States. I could be the next Annie Oakley."

A big grin crossed her friend's face and she grabbed her hands as they squealed like two young girls. "I'm so thrilled for you."

"It's what I've been wishing for," Tessa said. "This afternoon when I received the message that he wanted to speak to me, I didn't have a clue who he was and I almost didn't go, but something told me to hear what the man had to say. And now Seth and I are going to be putting on a version of Battle of the Sexes every weekend."

"And Seth's father is going to let him go?"

"I guess, he says he's going," she said. "We both want to earn

enough cash to start our own businesses.”

Yesterday Seth had showed her his dream, but she had not told him about hers. She wanted to teach young children the value and the safety of learning how to shoot. She wanted to help the next generation of marksmen and women learn. Who better to train them than the star of Walcott’s Medicine Show?

Sadie shook her head at her. “All you had to do was say something. I would loan you the money.”

“I know and I love you. But, no, I want to do this on my own. And this will give my school a big accreditation. Don’t you see? Parents will want their sons and daughters trained by the woman who was Annie Oakley’s rival. The best markswoman in the United States.”

A smile crossed Sadie’s face. “I’m so happy for you, but I hope you’ll be back in time to stand up with me when I marry Levi.”

She had to return to Fort Worth in time to be in Sadie’s wedding. She just had to. And there was Rose. The thought of seeing Rose again had her smiling.

“If we go anywhere near New York City, I’m going to visit Rose and Hayden.”

“Of course,” Sadie replied.

Her friend’s face grew pensive. “Have you thought of what it will be like to travel with a medicine show?”

That thought, she was still a little nervous about. But she hoped that she could deal with living with other performers.

“Mr. Walcott said the men have sleeping cars on the train and so do the women. Only problem is that there are four to a car.”

Being in tight quarters with four women could be interesting, but she was determined to make the most of it. It would be an adventure she’d never thought of having, and she couldn’t wait to get started.

“When do you leave?”

“Day after tomorrow,” Tessa said. “That’s why I had to come and tell you. We pull out at six o’clock in the morning.”

Nodding, her friend stared at her. “I’m happy for you, but I’m also sad that you’re leaving.”

“Me too, but I had to get away from Fort Worth for a while. Especially after my father lied to me.”

The memory of her brothers telling her the truth hurt. Why did her father have to lie? Especially when she was certain she could

win. Especially since he knew she could win. Maybe even her own father didn't want her to beat another man.

"You're going to be traveling with people you don't know. The only person you'll have a connection to is Seth. How are you going to get along with him?"

How would she do being with Seth day in and day out? Planning shows, working together side by side, and yet, it was also one of the reasons she wanted to do this.

"I'm so attracted to him. And he's kissed me several times," she said with a sigh. "But he's a womanizer. I've watched how women react to him and sometimes he eats it up. Not to worry, I'm not pretty enough for him."

She remembered how Carrie had thrown herself at him, even with Tessa standing right there. But she was invisible. She was not near pretty enough for Seth to marry. She was nothing but a partner in helping them both make money.

Sadie took her hand. "You're beautiful. You could compete against any woman who flirts with him. The question should be is he what you want?"

That was indeed a question Tessa needed to answer. But still not one she considered seriously.

"But I won't compete with the other women. I'm not curvaceous like you. Men like their women big busted with rounded hips. And that's not me."

"If he's kissing you, he's attracted to you," Sadie replied.

Tessa laughed. "That man would kiss a pig if it got him something he needed or wanted. His kisses are not so much *for* me, but rather, what they will get *from* me. Like another exposition where I outgun him. Rather like a chance for him to prove to his sister that I was not going to back down from her. The man uses his lips to get what he wants."

"Be careful, Tessa. I fear you're playing with fire. A fire that you know nothing about and you're going to get burned."

It was very possible. If anyone could hurt her, it would be Seth Robinson. What if he quit the show, then they wouldn't keep her? What if he accidentally shot her? What if they hated each other all the time around the United States?

"You could be right, but I'm willing to take that risk. Right now, this is the only thing I have going for me that will pay me decent money."

“Just be careful,” Sadie said. “The man is a notorious womanizer. And his voice is honey silk when he wants something from you.”

A grin spread across Tessa’s face. “Yes, I noticed that. It gets lower and deeper and so smooth, you just want to take off your clothes. But mine are staying on.”

Sadie laughed. “Come on, let’s find a bottle of champagne and drink it before you’re gone. We’ll toast to a man learning to keep his hands to himself.”

“Yes,” Tessa said, though part of her really didn’t mind the feel of Seth’s fingers as he caressed her.



# Chapter 16

Seth walked into his father's study, knowing this would not be a pleasant conversation. The man would call him all kinds of a fool and might even kick him out. Who knew? But that didn't matter any longer.

He and Tessa were going to be part of the Walcott's Western Medicine Show. Already, he could see himself making enough money to purchase the land he wanted. And if they were pleasing, they might even become the main attraction.

As he pushed open the door, his father sat in the corner in his chair, reading the paper.

"Good evening," Seth said, walking in feeling like he was arriving like a boy for punishment. Shouldn't a son look forward to speaking to his father instead of dreading this conversation.

"Good evening, son," he said. "Are you prepared for your interview tomorrow?"

Now the explosion would grow and become a permanent problem.

"No, sir," he said. "I'm not going to interview with the bank."

His father lowered his newspaper, his dark eyes flashing with annoyance. "Haven't we already been over this?"

Multiple times, but his father had never actually gotten him an interview, and now he would have to cancel it.

"Yes, sir, but I'm leaving town tomorrow," he said.

A frown creased his father's forehead as he stared at his son. "Should I ask where you're going?"

This his father would not appreciate either.

"Mr. Harry Walcott was at the Battle of the Sexes the other day and watched me and Tessa perform." His father's brows drew together, just like they did before he yelled. "He's asked us to perform in his western and medicine show. We leave tomorrow for Kansas City where we will perform in our first show."

His father didn't say a word and that shocked him. Usually by now, he would be screaming at him so loud, his mother would run in to see what the problem was. But this was fiercer.

“My son, my only son, is going to perform in a medicine show? What kind of man did I raise?” He shook his head. “Get the hell out of my sight. I can’t even think about this right now. I just can’t imagine you would want to be a slimy con man working in a medicine show.”

Why did his father always think the worst? Why couldn’t he be proud that he was the top marksman in the state of Texas?

“No, we’re not going to be selling anything. We’re going to perform like we did for the Battle of the Sexes.”

He closed his eyes and shook his head. “You lost a second time against her. How is it going to feel every time a woman beats you? How are you going to show your face to those hard men with them knowing a woman beat you?”

The words were like someone stabbing him with a knife. They hurt. Yes, he hated that Tessa had beaten him twice, but he could make enough money never to be under his father’s rule again.

“Don’t come crying to me needing money. Your trust fund has been stopped. I’m not paying for my son to run away with the circus and be one of the clowns.” A snarl came from his lips. “Get out of my study, and when you return, your bedroom will not be available. You’re being kicked out and disowned.”

Astounded, Seth watched his father. “Maybe while I’m out on the road, I’ll locate a new father. One who loves his son for who he is.”

With that, he turned and marched out of the room, slamming the door behind him. The man was wrong. And he would prove to the man that he didn’t need the trust fund. He would never ask for money. He would make it on his own without his father’s help.

As he walked down the hall to his bedroom, Nellie stood outside her door.

“You and Papa fighting again?”

“Yes,” he said, walking past her.

She fell into step beside him. “What about this time?”

“Today, I received an offer to work for the Walcott Western Medicine Show alongside Tessa Harris.”

His sister’s shocked expression pleased him. No one in his family thought him capable of making it without being a banker or a lawyer. He would show them.

A gasp escaped from Nellie. “No.”

“Yes, and this will help me to purchase that land I’ve been

looking at to raise cattle.”

He opened the door to his room and Nellie stood twirling her hair gazing at him as he pulled out his duffle bag and load it with clothes.

“So, you and Tessa are going to appear in a wild west show?”

“Yes,” he said.

Shaking her head, she laughed. “Wait until I tell Mrs. Griffin,” she said. “She’ll put it in the newspaper.”

At first, he was upset with the idea, but then decided what could it hurt? It would be free publicity for both of them and the show.

“Promise me one thing,” Nellie said as he packed his belongings.

“What?”

“Don’t come back married or even worse with Tessa pregnant. That girl is not for you,” she admonished.

Funny, Tessa felt right. There was something about the way she fit in his arms. The way her lips tasted and how he wanted to ravish her every time he saw her. No, he wasn’t certain that she was the woman for him, but right now, he was going to pursue her and learn what was it about this woman that drew him.

“I’m not making any promises,” he said.

“Oh my God, you like her,” she spat suddenly angry.

“Yeah, I like her. What does it matter to you?”

“Because she’s part of that Bad Girls’ club. She’s not a good person.”

“And you are, dear sister?” he asked. “I’ve heard enough tales about what you do to know you’re not an innocent. And right now, you’re desperately searching for a husband.”

Her mouth dropped open and she became indignant. “I am not.”

“Well, I know you had your eyes set on Levi Griffin. How did that work out for you?”

She harrumphed. “I’m good friends with his mother. Believe me, when the right man comes along, I’ll know it. I’ll then be engaged, which is more than I can say for you. You’re going to be with those weird people with awful talents. Be careful or you could be the next headless man.”

He shook his head at her. “Nellie, I better not hear of any vicious rumors being spread about Tessa. Also, be nice. For once, let me come home and find out that you are now considered the nicest woman in town.”

She laughed. “And spoil all my fun of causing mischief?” A sigh

came from her. “Be careful, brother. I don’t want to be the only child with mom and dad’s focus on only me. I need you here.”

“Too bad. I’ve been officially evicted. I won’t be back living here at home. I’ve been disowned.”

# Chapter 17

The train rocked along the tracks before the sun rose in the eastern sky. They were on their way to their first big show, and it was there they would catch up to the rest of the performers.

A nervous pit grew in Tessa's stomach. She'd never been away from home in all her nineteen years. She'd never been out of the city of Fort Worth except for small excursions outside the city limits.

Now she was traveling with a man who was her enemy, her rival, her competitor who made her lungs seize and her knees weaken when he kissed her.

"How long will it take us to get to Kansas City?" she asked Seth who leaned back in the chair, his legs stretched out in front of him, trying to sleep.

"Two days," he said. "We'll arrive right before the next show."

"And we'll perform that night?"

"Yes," he said, his eyes still closed as the train swayed.

This was her first train ride and she felt nervous that she was one of very few women traveling alone. What had she done? If she failed at this, then she would be sent running back to her parents. No, that couldn't happen.

"Oh look, there were some deer," she said.

Finally he sat up and glared at her. "Are you going to talk all the way to Kansas City?"

"Does it bother you?"

He tilted his head, his eyes narrowing. "Yes, it does."

"Good, then I'll keep yapping on about something. What did your father say when you told him you were leaving?"

"Don't come back," he said.

She stared at him. "Really?"

"Yes, I've now been officially disowned. What did your father say? Especially after the Battle of the Sexes?"

"We haven't spoken," she said. "He doesn't know I left town. I thought it would be better if he learned it from that dreadful Betty Griffin."

For the longest time, she thought of seeing her family and telling them goodbye but decided in the end that it would just be one big fight. And she didn't want to fight with them any longer.

Seth nodded. "Oh, she'll know later today. Nellie was going to tell her. I thought it might be good for business."

Her head whipped around to glare at him. "The whole town of Fort Worth gossiping about us?"

That would make her family dislike her even more. But what did it matter as long as she was doing what she loved?

"Yes, as a matter of fact. They might tell their friends and family in other towns to come see us because we're the best thing around."

Why did she get the feeling he was being sarcastic? But then again, maybe not.

"We've got to plan our performance," she said. "If we're going to continue this battle between the sexes, then we need to come up with some things that irritate each other."

Laughter sprang from his lips. "Oh, that's easy. Let's see...never shutting up. Constantly proclaiming you're the best. Cheating to beat me."

"I didn't cheat. I merely had to wear a disguise so that they would let me in."

"That's cheating," he said.

"Is not."

"Is so."

"You're a rich sophisticated guy with more money than you deserve," she said, just throwing out something that would make him seem bad. "And you're a womanizer."

"I like women. What's wrong with that?" he said, his voice raising. "And you're so damn wrong about the money. My father officially cut my trust fund and refuses to help me with any finances. He wants me to get a real job, working in a bank. I'm now the disowned son of the mayor of Fort Worth."

"Damn, he's mean," she said softly.

"I asked him if on this trip I could find another father. One who supports me mentally and physically, not just monetarily. But that river has dried up."

"What are you going to do?"

"Live on the money I make, like everyone else," he said.

Tessa thought about her own financial situation. What if she ran out of money? Sadie had slipped her some cash and told her if she

needed more all she had to do was send her a telegram, but she didn't want to ask her friend for money. She wanted to make it on her own.

And Seth had a trust fund? That almost made her laugh.

"Can a spoiled rich boy like you do that?"

He turned and faced her. "I'm not rich."

"Not many poor people I know have trust funds," she said.

He was silent for a moment.

"No, I guess not. But like I said, that river has run dry. Don't do what your papa tells you to do and he cuts off your funds. What he doesn't know is that I've been saving my little nest egg each month hoping to buy that land."

Turning, she stared at him. "The land you showed me?"

"Yes, what did you think about that piece of property?"

"I loved the way the creek ran through the middle and how you can build a house on the bluff looking down on it."

"That is what this journey is all about for me. What about you?"

She smiled. "What I've wanted to do since I first heard about her. I want to be the next Annie Oakley. Show people what I can do with a gun."

Shaking his head, he stared at her. "Funny, I want to buy a ranch, raise cows, and eventually a family, while you want the glitch and glamour of being a star in a wild west show."

"That's right, womanizer," she said.

"What is wrong with a man liking women?"

"It's the number and the fact that you like to taste them all."

"Yes, I like to kiss them. But that's all I do unless they offer more," he said with a grin.

"And that's the problem. It's the taking what's offered," she said. "That's what makes you a womanizer."

He laughed out loud. "If they offer, I'm not going to turn them down and hurt their feelings. That wouldn't be kind."

Tessa shook her head. She had let him kiss her, but never would she let him do anything more. But then again, she was an innocent. While her mother had explained what went on between a man and a woman, the very thought of the act was not something that excited her. Not even with Seth. How did a man convince a woman to give up her reputation?

"Well, I don't understand why a woman would offer you more," she said.

Seth leaned his head back and roared with laughter.

“What I said was not funny,” she responded.

Finally, when he finished laughing, he smiled at her. “You are such a temptation. If we weren’t on this train, I would show you why women offer me more. It would be a delight to enlighten you to what really goes on between a man and a woman.”

She licked her lips, suddenly feeling nervous at the thought of what he would do to her.

“But I said, no,” she replied.

“Yes, you did,” he said with a grin. “But when I’m finished with you, you’d be begging me and you’d say yes.”

That just irritated her. While she had no idea what he was referring to, she just wanted to kick him in the shin and say no. But she feared that would only encourage him to show her how he could persuade her.

“Did you like when I kissed you,” he said in a low voice that seemed to reach inside her and cause her lungs to squeeze the breath from her.

How did she answer? If she admitted she’d enjoyed his kisses, then she would be just like all the other women he’d seduced.

“Your kisses could use some improvement,” she said.

Stunned, he laugh and then leaned close. “Come on, Tessa. You know I’m the first man who you’ve ever kissed. You know you enjoyed the feel of my lips pressing against yours. The way my tongue played along your lips before entering your mouth.”

Oh, dear Lord, her heart was racing inside her chest. He was right and she had to do her best to stop him from saying anything else.

“Your breath was bad,” she said, hoping it would discourage him.

“It was not. Because every morning I brush and rinse my mouth with a special liquid to give me sweet breath.”

Well, crap, now what did she say? Maybe she should just admit the truth.

“Your kiss was my first and I have nothing to compare it to, so I don’t know if it was good or not.”

He grinned, reached over, and picked up her hand, bringing it up to his mouth.

“Now, that’s what I wanted to hear. You admitting that I’m your first kiss. I aim to be your first in lots of ways.”



Tessa's mouth dropped open and she stared at him. What the hell did she do now? The man was going to attempt to seduce her and she didn't know if she had the will to stop him.

Or that she even wanted to, which left her feeling very vulnerable.

# Chapter 18

When they arrived in Kansas City, they had been rushed to where the show was parked on the edge of town. At first, Seth had been surprised at the size of the arena. A big tent was pitched in the center with smaller areas set up for them to sell tonics, salves, lotions, and even a vial of snake oil.

Nothing that interested Seth. His purpose here was to perform every weekend until the show ended its season in October in New York.

As they prepared to dress for the show, Mr Walcott brought out two outfits.

"This is all I have that's not being used, but I thought it would at least make you look a little more glamorous," he said handing a short skirt with lace and a low-cut bodice to Tessa. It actually looked more like a saloon girl than a marksman outfit.

"All I want is the hat. I'll make do with my own clothes," she said.

"No, you must wear the outfit. It shows you're a performer," he said.

Seth didn't like that Mr. Walcott wanted her to dress in the skimpiest outfit. Even the bar maids wore more clothing.

"But there is so little of it," she replied.

He grinned. "Yes, well, the men will enjoy gazing at you," he said.

Seth was shocked that she didn't pull out one of her pistols and shoot the man. And he couldn't blame her if she did. He really didn't want her wearing that outfit.

"We'll see about that," she said, taking the dress from him.

The workers for the show were busy making certain that everything was prepared as they hurried around them, setting up the acts.

"And this here outfit is for you," he said, handing Seth an outfit that made him look like he was a trapeze artist. "Something for the women to enjoy."

"I'd rather look more like a cowboy than one of the flying

leotard brothers.”

The man frowned. “All right, but Tessa must wear her outfit. The men want to see as much of her as possible. It’s part of the show.”

“Sure,” she said and Seth didn’t have a good feeling about the way she responded. That sarcastic *sure* was a guaranteed no. Even he knew that much about this sassy woman.

“I know we were on the train, but have you got a plan for your act tonight?”

“Yes,” they both said and grinned at one another.

On the train, they had come up with some ideas and he knew they would improvise some of what they were going to do.

“All right, you both come on right after the flying Zambonies,” he said. “Oh, and I hope you have blanks, no real bullets since we will have audience placed all around you.”

As far as he knew, they only had real bullets, but they could make do. Tomorrow, he would make certain they picked up the proper ammunition to use in the show. That was if they survived the first night.

What if the audience hated them? What if they shot one another accidentally? Or someone in the audience?

Mr. Walcott walked to the entrance of the tent. “Break a leg tonight.”

Stunned, they watched him walk away.

“I’m not wearing this,” she spat.

“You have to,” he said.

“True, I do, but this outfit will not be the same by the time I’m finished with it.”

He smiled. “You remember what we’re going to do tonight?”

She smiled at him. “Oh yes, I remember. And I’m still going to beat you. It will be the Battle of the Sexes, part two.”

Just then the carnies rolled in their targets and placed them in the line of acts.

“Guess, we’re doing this,” Seth said.

“Yes, and I can’t wait. Soon, we’ll be asked to be in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show,” she said with a grin. “But for now, I must fix this costume or join a whore house.”

Seth laughed. “That’s not possible. You need experience.”

“Funny,” she said as she rummaged through her bag looking for what she needed.

Three hours later, they stood inside the tent waiting to go on. Seth had never felt more nervous in all his life while Tessa sat there grinning. She wore a long housecoat over her outfit, and he knew she'd done something to make the dress more suitable. Though he would have liked to have seen her in the original garment.

The manager turned to them. "You're up next."

Tessa checked her guns and bag of bullets. "All ready."

She glanced at him and frowned. "Why are you all white? We've done this before. There's no reason to be nervous."

That was true, but this felt bigger than the Battle of the Sexes in Fort Worth. This time, they would be part of a show, and if they bombed, they could be sent home tomorrow.

"And now our newest act, two sharpshooters from Fort Worth Texas in the Battle of the Sexes."

She dropped the robe and he gasped. She had put a row of white frilly lace in the bodice and around the hem.

They walked out in the center of the ring. The lights that shined on them were bright. How could he ever see the targets? What if he shot Tessa?

In the middle of the arena, he turned to Tessa and walked around her.

"What did you do to your outfit?"

"What? This old dress?"

"Yes, Mr. Walcott is the one who gave you that dress to wear."

She grinned. "And I made some modifications so that the men would be looking at my shooting and not my womanly areas."

The audience laughed.

"But he said he wanted the men to be looking at your curves."

"True, but I had other ideas. I want them to notice how I handle a pistol and a rifle. I want them to see that beneath all this lace a real woman can beat a man."

Taking a twirl, she nodded at the audience.

She really liked to play up the fact that she was a woman marksman and could beat a man.

"You ready to get beat again?"

"No, this time I'm going to be the one who wins," he said.

"I don't think so," she said. "After all, I'm not the womanizing rich son with a trust fund. I'm just a poor girl who learned to shoot."

"Yeah, at your father's expense since he owns a smithery."

She shrugged. "First five shots will clear the target."

"Go for it, but I can do it in four."

She shot out the bull's-eye on the mark and the assistants wheeled out a second target. Seth managed to do it barely in four. Next time, he'd stick her with the four.

"See women are better shots."

"You got five attempts, I did it in four. This time see if you can clear the target with the rifle in four attempts."

She grinned at him. "Watch me."

She lay on the dirt floor, aimed at the target, and shot four rounds taking out the center eye.

"Can you do it in three?"

"No," he said, knowing he'd tried before. "Put your bloomers up there and I bet I can take them down in two."

A blush spread across her face. "Keep my bloomers out of this. We already know you're good at getting into a woman's bloomers."

The audience roared with laughter.

Seth kneeled and took out the bull's-eye in four shots.

"Wow, you're getting better. We're even."

"No, I should be ahead since I did the first one in four shots."

"But you didn't give me the chance to do it in four shots. We're even."

"You see how she cheats," he said to the crowd.

From her pocket, she pulled a tiny pistol and shot it at his feet. "Shut up and let's get back to this next stage."

"Hey, you shot at me," he said.

"And if you don't get back in line, I'll do it again," she said.

The audience laughed.

"Next up is the trick portion of the competition. My trick will be to shoot a cigar out of your mouth," she said.

"Oh, hell no," he replied. "You don't even like me. You're not going to shoot a cigar from between my lips. You might ruin this pretty face."

"And then the ladies would be so disappointed, wouldn't they?" she replied.

"All right, then I'm going to hit the target while shooting my Colt from between my legs. Now, I don't recommend that any of you ladies try this at home. It gives you a little puff of black smoke and the vibrations from the shots could cause you to moan."

Seth started shaking his head "No, just no. This is a family show,

and nothing should be between your legs.”

The audience roared with laughter.

She turned and gave him a look. “Same goes for you, buddy. But that doesn’t seem to stop you, does it?”

He frowned. “We’re not talking about me.”

She whirled around and stuck the gun between her legs and fired off three rapid shots, hitting the target each time.

When she finished, she pulled the gun up and blew on the end of the barrel. “Smoking hot.”

“I’m surprised that pistol doesn’t have frost bite,” he said.

With a disdainful look, she turned and flipped her skirt up, showing her bloomers that said *Kiss My Ass*.

“Your turn,” she said. “Beat that.”

“I’d like to lay you across my lap and do just that.”

He crossed two pistols over his shoulder and began to fire, hitting the target. After two rounds, he stopped.

Once again, he’d missed the target one time, but that one time was enough to keep him from winning.

“I won,” she said, strutting around the arena laughing and smiling. “The lady took the championship once again.”

The audience stood and gave them a standing ovation as together they ran around the arena and out the entrance.

When they were behind the curtains, he turned to her. “Good job. I thought it went well.”

“Me too,” she said laughing. “Sorry, I beat you again.”

“I’m used to it by now.”

Just then Mr. Walcott walked up with another man in a suit. The man gazed at Tessa like he wanted to undress her, and it was all Seth could do to keep from hitting him with his fist.

“I’d like to introduce you to Mr. Lovell, one of the investors in the show.”

“Excellent,” he said, his eyes never leaving Tessa. “You’re quite a markswoman.”

“Thank you,” she said and smiled, not seeing that the man wanted nothing more than to get between her legs.

“Are you going to travel with us,” she asked.

“Off and on, I’ll be around. I like to keep my eye on what’s going on,” he said. “I’ll be watching your performance every chance I get.”

“Thank you,” she said and it was all Seth could do not to show

the man his feelings regarding the way the stared at Tessa.

“Miss Harris, I see you did some altering on the dress.”

“Yes, sir, it was too big and all that would have happened is my breasts would have fallen out. This way, I kept us out of trouble with the law.”

He grinned. “Good job. So far, you’re the best show of the night, though you had me worried when you shot at Seth’s foot.”

“Nah, it was just to scare him.”

But he hadn’t been afraid because he knew Tessa had his back. She would protect him, keep him safe.

“Good job,” he said as he walked away. “Tomorrow, we do a couple shows.”

The two men walked away, and Seth felt a shiver of fear trickle down his spine. He didn’t like that Mr. Lovell. Something about the man that gave him the creeps.

# Chapter 19

The next day, their performance was even better. They kept the audience laughing at their antics. Once, they even pretended that they were going to duel one another as they stood back-to-back, marching off their paces, only to turn and shoot over each other's shoulder. Taunting each other while they were shooting. Predicting who was going to die first.

After it was over, they returned to their perspective tents where they stayed.

Tessa shared a tent with three other women, and she felt like they were all on top of one another, but what could she do? As she removed her costume and hung it up, she saw a folded piece of paper on her bed.

"What's this," she asked the other women.

"Don't know," the snake charmer replied, not gazing at her. "Just came into the tent myself."

Hanging up her dress on coat rack, she put on her street clothes and then opened the note.

*Miss Harris,*

*I can beat you. I know I can. While it would be considered improper, I would like to have a contest with you. If I win, then you spend the night with me where I will do all kinds of decadent things to your lovely body all night. The sounds of your moans will fill the room as I make you mine. Sooner or later, I will get you and we will have a challenge to see who the real winner is.*

*An Admirer*

A chill rippled through her.

"Did any of you see who came in here and left this note?"

"No," they said, gazing at her like she'd lost her mind, their eyes shifting away from her. Did they know and not want to tell her?

Trying to help them understand that she needed to know who had entered their tent and left a message that gave her chills, she read it out loud.

"Oh, honey, we all get these kinds of messages. It's just an admirer who has gone a little overboard. Get used to getting these



suggestive notes. It's part of being a performer."

No, this didn't feel right. No one sent an anonymous message and said he wanted to do decadent things to her body, or at least, none of her friends did such horrible things.

"Even with them wanting to do things with you?"

The women all laughed. "Honey, the men out there think we're nothing more than two-bit whores."

Susie shook her head. "Toss the note. It's not worth worrying about."

But something kept Tessa from throwing it away. What would Seth say when he saw this note?

"Hey, we're all going out tonight to the saloon. Do you want to go?"

It was the first time they had asked her to participate, and yet, she didn't want to go to a saloon. But maybe she should, just to get out. She wouldn't be alone in the tent then.

"All right," she said.

"Are you going to bring your lover Seth?" Ethel the snake handler asked.

"He's not my lover, and in fact, we truly are enemies," she said, wondering how they had gotten lover out of the way they sparred over everything.

The women all laughed. "Oh, honey, you just made him prime real estate. Tonight, we're going to try to take him off your hands."

"You do that," she said, her stomach curling into knots. Though she didn't want him, she didn't want these women to have him either. But it was her own fault. She had told the truth regarding Seth, and now these women would tempt him into their lairs and she knew they would be successful.

That hurt.

Maybe she should stay here at the tent after all. No, she needed to get out. And she probably should warn Seth that the women were coming for him.

The only time Tessa had been inside a saloon was when she went with Seth and they drank whiskey. Tonight, she would drink something other than liquor.

An hour later, they walked inside the wild establishment and there was none other than Seth talking to some men. He glanced up when he saw her and stared before a smile spread across his face.

He slowly made his way across the room to the four of them.

“Good evening, ladies,” he said.

Ethel took his arm. “Sugar, I hear you’re available.”

“What?” he asked bemused.

“Tessa said you and her are enemies, not lovers like we all thought,” Ethel said with a grin. “Sweetie, I’m available any time.”

Tessa turned away from the spectacle the women were making over Seth and walked to the bar. To hell with no liquor. She needed a drink and couldn’t watch these women throw themselves at Seth.

“What can I get you?”

“A whiskey,” she said because that was the only alcohol she knew. Her father had never been one for drinking and her mother probably had never had a sip of the stuff. But Tessa was going to learn to handle her liquor.

She paid the bartender and then slammed back the whiskey. It burned all the way down her throat.

The man beside her grinned. “It’s usually better if you sip the stuff. That way you can taste it.”

“I don’t want to taste it,” she said, thinking why in the world would this man talk to her.

She ordered a second whiskey and slammed it down.

“Someone is going to have to carry you home,” he said.

She grinned at the man. “And it’s not going to be you.”

“Hey, aren’t you that woman in that wild west show? Didn’t you beat that man shooting?”

The alcohol was beginning to affect her, but she smiled at him. “That’s me.”

The music grew louder and people were dancing.

“I bet I could beat you.”

Did she just hear him right? Fear spiraled through her and she suddenly remembered the note. Was he the man who had gotten into their tent and left her a message?

And now she had drank too much alcohol all because she didn’t like the idea of the women going after Seth.

Stupid. So very stupid.

Nervously, she licked her lips. “I guess we’ll never know whether you can beat me.”

She turned and walked away, needing to get as far from that man as possible. It just seemed odd that he would say the same words to her that were in the note.

The saloon had grown crowded and she felt like a trout trying to

swim upstream. She needed to get out of here. Fear swelled inside her, and she had never felt so claustrophobic. There were so many bodies surrounding her and she wanted out.

Suddenly she felt a hand at her elbow and whirled around to tell whoever it was to take his paws off her, but it was Seth. Relief filled her.

“Get me out of here,” she said, desperately needing fresh air and fewer bodies.

“You all right?”

“No.”

Grasping her arm, he pulled her through the throng of people. Where the other women had gone, she didn’t know and didn’t care.

When they walked out into the street, she took a deep breath. The world spun, and for a moment, she felt she was going to throw up. Oh no, she couldn’t do that to him a second time.

“What happened in there?”

“When I walked up to the bar, this man started talking to me. He realized who I was and said he could beat me.”

Seth frowned. “Most men think they’re a better marksman than you until they go up against you.”

“True, but this afternoon when I came back to the tent after the show, I found this note on my bed.”

She pulled it out of her pocket and handed it to Seth. Standing outside of the saloon, he leaned toward the light.

Fear spiraled through her, and she knew that she couldn’t go back in the saloon. She would go back to her tent.

“That man in there said almost the same words to me. I was so afraid that he was the one who wrote it.”

“Do you want me to go in there and confront him?”

“No,” she said as the doors swung open and two men stumbled out.

She didn’t want to be alone.

“It’s just odd that he said almost the same words that were in the note.”

“Any man is going to believe they are better at shooting than you. Believe me, I know firsthand.”

A smile crossed her face. “Well, you are the toughest opponent I’ve ever faced.”

“And that’s supposed to make me feel better?”

“Do you want me to let you win?”

Not that she would, and she would be so disappointed in him if he said yes.

"No, it's just I'd like to beat you at least once."

"Then keep practicing," she said. "Become the best you can be."

Seth sighed. "Come on, I'll walk you back to your tent."

Thank goodness, he was not going to leave her alone.

"You're not going to spend time with the ladies?"

He glanced at her, and even in the scant light of the streetlamps, she could see his disgust. "No. I'm not. Did you set them on me?"

"No," she said. "But when I told them we were not lovers, but enemies, they decided you would be theirs tonight."

The man frowned and shook his head, clearly appalled with her.

"Well, thanks for that. Those three women were just looking for someone to take to bed and I'm certain I would not have been their first."

She giggled.

"So you're only into virgins?"

"I'm into decent women. Not just someone who sleeps with anyone," he said. "I'm into women like you."

"But we don't like each other," she said.

He laughed. "Sometimes we like each other, and other times, we fight and argue in front of crowds."

The earth seemed to move before her eyes and he had to grab her arm to keep her from falling.

"How much whiskey did you drink?"

"Two drinks," she said. "But I'm not good at drinking whiskey."

"No kidding," he said as he tucked her arm around his elbow.

Music came from the saloons as they walked along Main Street on their way back to the show and their tents.

"What do you think of our performance?" he asked her.

"I'm loving being in the show, but I hate having to share a tent with three women. One of whom is a snake handler. She keeps her snake in a basket inside our tent."

A shiver went through her at the thought of that snake getting loose. It would be a dead snake if it came near her.

He laughed.

"I'm staying with the lion tamer and two trapeze artists. The lion tamer snores as loud as his lion roars."

"Oh my," she said with a giggle. "Are you ready to quit?" she asked.

"No, I want to earn money. But this will never be my lifelong career."

Tessa didn't know what to say. This was her dream until she had enough money to start the school. But already she could see this was not something she would do for the rest of her life.

"I'd still like to be part of Buffalo Bill's show. If he asked us to join him, would you go with me?"

Seth sighed. "Depends on how much money he offered us. If it was a lot, then yes. But if not, once I get enough to start my ranch, I'm out of here. You need to be thinking of a way to put on a show without me."

They had only just begun, and she wasn't ready for him to leave. "I hope you'll stay for a while." A shiver ran through her as she thought of the note she received. "I'm still frightened by that man."

"Let's hope it's just an admirer like the women told you. But it does make me uneasy. And there is no way to lock a tent."

"No," she said. "You could have stayed and flirted with other women."

They stopped in the middle of the street and he turned her toward him. "Damn it, Tessa, when are you going to realize I want you. No one else but you."

On some level, she had known he wanted her, but she wasn't good enough for him. She wasn't rich enough, she wasn't enough anything for him.

"I'm not pretty," she said in a whisper.

"What in the hell are you talking about?"

"All the women I ever saw you with were beautiful and sophisticated and acted like women. We're battling each other in a contest and I'm shooting like a man. I'm not beautiful and sophisticated. I'm nothing like the women I've seen you with."

For a moment, he stood there and stared at her. "Do you not see yourself in the mirror? You're beautiful. And because you're not like the other women, that's what I find so attractive. You stand up to me. You're not like those ladies who were throwing themselves at me. You're innocent and bold and beautiful, and damn it, Tessa, if I don't kiss you right now, I'm going to die."

She couldn't help herself, she giggled.

He pulled her tightly against him, his lips covering hers, his mouth demanding as he took control and ravished her mouth. Her arms slipped up around his neck and she clung to him.

This kiss was even better than the last time he'd kissed her. This kiss had her body sizzling with a heat that traveled right down to her center. He pressed his body against hers and she could feel his hardened shaft pressing into her and she liked it.

What if they didn't hate each other any longer? What if they destroyed their act by becoming friends?

Finally, she pushed back, needing to breath. "Damn it, Seth. That was the best kiss I've ever experienced. But how can I continue to hate you if you're kissing me? You're going to ruin our show."

"We can be enemies in the arena, but I'm coming after you, Tessa. I'm going to make you mine."

A thrill spiraled through her, and she realized she wanted to be his. But what did that mean?

## Chapter 20

Two weeks later, Seth went to Mr. Walcott. As of that evening, Tessa had received three notes from this secret admirer of hers. Each one more descriptive than the last. Each one detailing the sexual things he wanted to do to her.

Each one frightening her more and more which left Seth seeing red. It would be in the man's best interest for him to remain anonymous or Seth might use him for target practice.

He realized that whoever was sending these notes must be with the show because one was in her tent in every city they stopped at. While they were performing, someone sneaked into her private space. It could be any number of people. The performers, the hands, the animal handlers or even one of the managers. Whoever it was, the notes were upsetting Tessa.

Now a pair of her bloomers was missing, and she feared that he'd gone through her trunk, through her personal belongings.

Their show still had them as rivals, but outside, they were fast becoming good friends. Really good friends. In some ways after they fought in the arena, he would be so hungry for her afterward. While she still struggled to acknowledge their attraction, he was doing everything he could to convince her they made a good pair.

And they did. There was enough attraction between them to start a fire.

Though he would not want to live his life traveling with this show forever, it was a good experience. But his dreams of being a rancher were still his goal. And with every show, he made more money toward his dream.

Their portion of the show they now promoted in every city. The Battle of the Sexes was becoming a big attraction and they had been given more time to perform. The audience loved their teasing and bantering and even Seth enjoyed battling with Tessa.

It was almost like a sexual foreplay as they taunted each other in front of a crowd.

As long as he could kiss her senseless when the show was over, he was satisfied for now. And he kissed her every chance he could.

But the notes were concerning and he feared that eventually this person was going to grow bolder. And he hated leaving her at night to sleep in a flimsy tent with only her guns as protection.

Now, as the workers tore down the tents and the show packed up to move on, he stood outside Mr. Walcott's train car. It was time for him to know what was going on and do something. Time for them to work together to stop this nonsense.

A guard stood outside the door and Seth frowned. Why did the man need a guard?

"I'm here to see Mr. Walcott," Seth said.

"Who are you?"

"Seth Robinson," he said.

"Just a minute," the man knocked and then opened the door. In a matter of minutes, he stepped back outside.

"He'll see you for ten minutes," he said. "He's a busy man."

"Thank you," Seth said, wondering what he could be doing.

When he stepped inside, he was shocked. In the lavish railroad car, a bed occupied one corner, a couch and a chair another, with a large desk to the side. A lot of money was laid out on the big oak desk and he was counting it and wrapping the cash in paper slips.

"Sorry, son, I'm just now getting around to tonight's receipts. We had a good night. Shame, but it's time to move on to the next stop."

Seth nodded. How would the man feel about what he was about to tell him?

"What can I help you with?"

This was serious and he wanted the man's attention.

"Tessa has received three threatening notes in her tent. Some man believes he can outshoot her and wants to challenge her to a contest. If he wins, he describes what he's going to do to her in these notes. Sexual things."

The man looked up and sighed. "Of course, all men think they can beat a woman. How long has this been going on? Has it happened in more than one city?"

"Yes, the last three cities we've played, she's received a note. I think it's someone in the show."

The man leaned back and sighed. "Unfortunately, this is common in traveling shows. Sometimes it's professional jealousy and sometimes it's because we have a mad individual traveling with us. And I have no way of knowing who that person is."

Seth could see that happening, but how did they stop the threats



or catch the person responsible for tormenting her? How did they protect Tessa?

“What can we do?”

His lips came together in a line. “I’ll tell our security to keep an eye on her tent. We’ll try to catch them, but it’s nearly impossible with us traveling so much. People come and go and are never with us for long. At least Tessa knows how to use a gun to protect herself.”

That was true, but he still feared for her safety. A woman could be easily overtaken, and if she couldn’t reach her guns, then she was in trouble.

“I’d hate for us to have to pull out of the show. If we thought she was endangered, we might.”

The man’s eyes widened, and Seth could see he was disturbed by the idea of them leaving.

“Let’s not rush into anything. We’ll put extra protection around her tent and do everything to keep our star safe. You two are becoming the main attraction and we want to keep you here. Sometimes professional jealousy causes people to act insane.”

Right now, the main attraction was the trapeze act, and they were a tight-knit group. The men and women were married to one another and he couldn’t see them doing this out of professional jealousy. But then again, he’d never been in a show like this.

The door opened, the guard letting him know his ten minutes were up.

“Thank you, Mr. Walcott. I appreciate your time.”

The man smiled. “Next time remember that the night we leave a city is my busiest time. But I knew you didn’t know that and that’s why I agreed to see you.”

“Yes, sir,” Seth said as he walked out the door. How was he to know?

But frankly, he didn’t care. He would do whatever it took to protect Tessa. Whoever was sending these notes better hope he never found out or he would be in their next set as a target.

Tessa was an innocent and she didn’t understand what the man wanted to do to her, but Seth did. And she was a woman who was quickly capturing his heart.

# Chapter 21

Tessa was worried. She couldn't find Seth and finally she went to her railroad car to sleep. She was tired, scared, and ready for a good night's sleep.

When she opened the door, the other women were preparing for bed.

"Shut the damn door," Ethel said.

"All right," she replied, thinking probably just about every man in the troupe had seen Ethel's body and maybe even experienced it.

"We stuck your trunk in the corner under your bed. It was in our way," Susie said as she ran a brush through her hair.

"Thanks," Tessa said, wondering what she'd done to anger these ladies that she had to live with. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Yeah, your boyfriend went to see Mr. Walcott," Lucy said with that whine in her voice. The woman had the most irritating tone though she liked to entertain the men in her show.

"He did? I didn't know where he was, I couldn't find him."

"If you two are made the main stage act, I'm going to be so angry," Ethel said, reaching over and cooing to her snake.

Tessa hated that animal, but she had to live with it.

As for them being the main act, they were receiving more time, and while they had not made the announcement, Tessa wouldn't be surprised.

"I know nothing," she said, taking off her jacket and laying it on the bed.

"We all know you're getting more stage time," Lucy said. "Don't think we can't figure these things out."

"They made us shorten our act," Susie said.

The woman was so stupid that Tessa knew someone else had to have planted the idea in her head. She would never have figured that out for herself.

"Yes, we are getting more time," Tessa said, refusing to lie about it.

"Now your boyfriend is asking to be made the main attraction," Susie said with a sneer.

“He didn’t say anything to me about it,” she said. “In fact, I don’t know why he’s there.”

“Stop lying,” Lucy said. “You know very well why he was in there.”

Tessa had had enough. “First off, I’m not lying. I don’t know why he’s there, and second, it’s none of your damn business. Your act Ethel is not big enough for the main attraction, and you Lucy, I’m surprised the knife thrower hasn’t accidentally hit you, just to shut you up. And Susie, honey, wearing skimpy clothes will not make you the main draw. Now excuse me, ladies, I’m going to find Seth. And when I learn why he was there, it will be a cold day in hell before I tell you.”

She stomped out of the railroad car and hurried down the hall. The urge to get off the train and leave was almost overwhelming. What she thought it would be like to be in a wild west show she didn’t know, but this wasn’t it.

She loved performing and showing off her talents, but she hated sharing a tent or railroad car with the other women. The jealousy, the notes from her secret admirer, the food, the traveling was enough to make her think about quitting and going home.

With a sigh, she hurried through the train to the dining car.

Sinking down at an empty table, she placed her head in her hands. Why couldn’t she sleep here?

Mr. Lovell sat across from her. “You looked tired.”

She raised her eyes and gazed at him. “I’m exhausted. This week was hard.” Only because she let it become that way.

“If you’d like, you’re welcome to come to my cabin and sleep,” he said. “I’m usually a sleepwalker and don’t get much rest.”

That was a weird thing to offer a woman he barely knew. *Come sleep in my cabin.*

“Thanks, that’s a kind offer, but I just need to keep a cooler head about me and then I’ll go back to my railcar.”

A grin spread across his face. “It must be difficult sharing a cabin with other women,” he said.

“Yes,” she responded. “It is. But I’m thrilled to be here as part of this group. I’ll make do.”

It was true that she enjoyed being a part of the troupe and performing. It was all the other things that involved being part of the show that she detested.

Seth strolled down the aisle toward her. A sense of relief

overcame her. If anyone would understand, he would.

"I've been searching for you," he said.

"And I've been looking for you."

The wheels of the train began to roll, and Mr. Lovell stood. "That's my signal that it's time to let the rocking of the train help me sleep." He glanced at Tessa. "Remember my offer. Any time."

"Thank you," she said, thinking she would never take him up on his offer of his bed, because she feared what would come with it. And she was not in the least interested in Mr. Lovell.

The man walked away and Seth slid onto the bench across from her and picked up her hands. A sense of warmth filled her and she smiled. Whenever he touched her, her body reacted in such a nice way.

"I spoke to Mr. Walcott," he said, gazing at her.

"I know," she said. "The bitches told me. They thought you were in there asking to be the main event. Talk about a group of jealous women. That's why I'm out here and not sleeping in my bunk."

Jerking back, he shook his head. "No, I was telling him about the mysterious notes you're receiving. I mentioned we might have to leave if I feel they become more dangerous."

"What? No," she said. "I'm not ready for this to end. Are you?"

While she hated the man who was putting notes on her bunk, she also wasn't ready to concede and give up on this life. Not yet. Not until she made more money.

"No, but if I fear that your life is in danger, yes, I'll quit and do my best to convince you to leave with me."

"I'm afraid," she said and thought about what Mr. Lovell had proposed to her. Somehow she got the feeling that he wanted more than to just let her sleep in his bed. Oh no, he would take advantage of her and then toss her aside. Men like him were creepy.

But she could not tell Seth or he would do exactly what he said. Pack up and leave.

"Are you happy?" she asked.

A smile spread across his face. "I'm always happy when I'm with you."

His words made her feel better. "A couple of weeks ago, you said you would not do this the rest of your life. As much as I enjoy performing, I'm saving my money to open a school. A place where I can teach young people how to use a weapon properly. Prepare the national marksman champions of tomorrow."

He squeezed her hands. "I think that sounds like a wonderful plan. You will open your school and I will buy the land needed for my cattle ranch."

He leaned across the table and gave her a brief kiss.

"Mr. Walcott promised me that he would have someone watch your tent. He's thinks it's professional jealousy. We've become the most popular act and people don't like that."

She couldn't help but think about the women in her train car. Yes, they were jealous of the fact that their acts were not that great.

"I understand, but that's despicable what this person is saying to me."

"Yes, it is and if it doesn't stop or we don't find out who is doing this, then we'll be forced to leave."

How could she argue with him? If her life was in danger, performing was not worth it. And what this person described made her shiver with revulsion. No, just no.

"Can I walk you to your car?" he asked.

A smile crossed her face. "Only if you promise to kiss me good-night."

"Oh, that's a guarantee," he said.

Taking her by the hand, he led her through the train to her car. The lights were out and she knew they were probably all sleeping.

"Good-night, Seth," she said. "Pleasant dreams."

"You too," he said as his mouth covered hers and she pressed into his body. This part of their relationship she really enjoyed. His mouth took control of her lips and she relinquished herself into his kiss. A moan came from the back of her throat at the feel of his body against her own.

She could feel his hardened manhood, and for the first time, she wondered about the marital bed. Would it feel this good? Was this why women slept with him?

Pushing her hands against him, she knew it was time to say good-night or she wouldn't be able to.

"Good-night," she said and opened the door into her car.

With a sigh, she let her eyes adjust to the darkness. She found her nightgown, and after she removed her clothes, she slipped it on.

She crawled beneath the covers and settled down to sleep. Suddenly, she felt a snake slither up her leg.

"Damn it," she screamed throwing back the covers. She reached for her bag that held her gun and pulled it out.

At the sound of the hammer going back, Ethel screamed.

"No, no, don't shoot him. He must have gotten out of his basket."

One of the other women lit a lantern. The light revealed the python all curled up on her bunk, his tongue flicking in and out like he wanted to taste her.

She stood in a perfect stance, her pistol pointed at the vile reptile.

"Please, Tessa, don't kill him."

The animal was part of her act.

She turned and faced her. "If I ever catch him in my bed again, he's a dead snake, do you understand me? If I find any other animals in my bed, I won't hesitate to retaliate in the worst possible way. I may not shoot you, but you're going to wish you were dead."

The three women all gazed at her with wide innocent eyes.

"We don't have to like one another, but we do have to live together. If you make it any harder than it is, you'll be sorry. Don't test me, again."

Ethel picked up her boa constrictor and put him in his basket and clasped the lid shut.

Tessa pulled back her blankets and made certain that nothing else was in her bed before she crawled in.

No, this was not a life she wanted to live forever. It was tough and one she feared could result in death very quickly. Or put her in jail. The thought of that snake in her bed made her shiver.

As soon as she had enough money, she would quit the show. Now, even Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show didn't seem quite as appealing.

A shudder rippled through her. What else could happen?

## Chapter 22

Storm clouds were building in the west and Seth had an uneasy feeling about tonight's show. They were in Columbus, Ohio, and while the people were friendly, the weather seemed not to be cooperating.

The workers were trying to pull the big top up with the elephants and the horses, but the wind was blowing hard. Lightning splintered the sky and a boom of thunder roared, spooking the animals.

Mr. Walcott walked around the grounds. "Get the tent up, the show must go on. We're performing tonight regardless of the weather."

Normally, they performed three nights a week, traveled two to three days, and had one day of rest. The poor hands seldom had a day off. They were too busy either setting up or taking down, taking care of the animals, fixing tents, or any other things that needed doing.

The sky was beginning to turn dark and Seth feared that even if they did get the big top up, the weather would tear the fabric to pieces. Why not just wait until after this cloud passed?

Tessa walked up beside him and he squeezed her hand. "He's a determined man."

"Yes, he is," she said.

"Any notes today?"

"Not so far. Maybe you speaking with Mr. Walcott helped. Or me threatening to shoot Ethel's snake."

He turned and glanced at her, wondering what had happened.

"Last night when I went back into the car, it was in my bed. I crawled in under the covers and it slithered up my leg. I'm surprised you didn't hear me screaming."

The women were jealous of Tessa since he and she had been seen holding hands and kissing. They were resentful of the fact that the two of them had a better show than they. In fact, he was surprised they were still in the show. But where did older showgirls go after their careers were over?

“You threatened to shoot Ethel’s snake?”

“Yes, I did. And I don’t look for them to cause me any more trouble. I told them they would wish they were dead by the time I got finished with them. Spiders, elephant poop, rats, spoiled food, I can be very mean if I want to be.”

Gazing at her, he was amazed that this little pint-sized person could be so malicious when it came to revenge. But then again, they did fight every day in the arena. He would hate to see what she would do if they really did loath each other.

“I’ve got to run over to wardrobe. I’m getting a new western outfit that Mr. Walcott promised would not be too decadent. We’ll see.”

He nodded and watched her walk away. As much as he enjoyed being with her, he realized she could be hell when things didn’t go her way. And yet that was part of the attraction.

Unlike Nellie, Tessa was not hateful unless someone did something to her. Then that person had better be aware of the havoc she was about to rain down.

Thirty minutes later, he was busy helping the men secure the big tent by pounding stakes into the ground with a sledgehammer. The weather had taken a turn for the worse. The skies were dark, the wind was howling, and lightning lit up the night with thunder loud enough to shake the ground.

The tent was up, but Seth wasn’t certain that was a good idea. The wind gusted hard and balls of hail flew from the sky and struck the shelter. People ran seeking cover. The men yelled *danger* as baseball-sized ice rained down on them.

“Everyone, take cover,” Seth hollered as he ran beneath the tent. The center pole groaned as it held the whipping canvas.

The high-wire act had been preparing to practice as soon as the tent was secure. A blast of dirt and sand whirled through the area, picking up the wooden boxes that held the equipment and tossed them about, injuring anyone who got in the way.

A woman screamed and Seth made his way to help one of the artists. The wind had tangled her high wire and she was trapped. Quickly, he grabbed the lines and managed to untangle her.

“Get behind some large boxes until this is over,” he said. “The wind is getting stronger.”

Hail balls slammed against the roof, tearing it in places. The ice smashed into the ground. *Bam. Bam.* It hit over and over.



The workers were all huddled beneath the canopy, their hands over their heads as the hail stones broke through the canopy.

Dear God, he hoped Tessa was somewhere safe. Somewhere the hail couldn't come through.

"Tornado," someone shouted, and he glanced out at the twister spinning its way across the empty prairie toward them.

If they ran, they would be out on the open prairie. If the tent was lifted off the ground, they would have no cover.

Where was Tessa?

"Get behind something sturdy and pray," he screamed over the wind.

Dust and dirt and even debris swirled into the air. The pretty woman who rode on the lions back stood in shock staring at the churning wind, completely mesmerized at the danger coming right at them.

He ran over and grabbed her and threw on the ground covering her body with his. The roar of the cloud grew closer and closer, and he feared they were all going to die this afternoon.

All he could think of was Tessa and how he wished they were together.

And then the noise stopped. The hail sputtered to an end and a light rain fell. He rolled off the woman and glanced outside, stunned to see the tornado had disappeared into the clouds.

"It's over," he said, thinking prayer must have worked because he definitely thought they would all soon be flying straight to heaven.

He stood and helped the woman up off the ground.

She threw her arms around him. "Thank you, thank you, thank you. You are my hero. You saved me."

She reached up and kissed him on the lips and then proceeded to cover his face with her kisses.

"Thank you," she said. "I've never been so scared in all my life."

"Me either," he said truthfully. That was about as close a call with death as he had ever come.

"Seth," he heard Tessa screaming.

They ran to one another and just before she reached him, she stopped. A weird look came over her face and she gazed at him.

"I was terrified you'd been hurt. And instead I see you've been having fun," she said, her body stiffening.

"What? No, we all thought we were going to die. We were afraid

that twister was going to suck us up into the cloud.”

“Well, at least you weren’t alone,” she said, turning and walking away.

“Wait, I don’t understand?”

She turned and glanced back at him. “Your face, idiot. You have red lips all over your face.”

Oh, dear God, the woman was wearing lipstick when she kissed him.

“No, wait, it’s not like that. I saved the lady who trains with the lions. She was frozen, so I knocked her to the ground and covered her body with mine. She thanked me with a kiss.”

“I see that,” she said and continued walking.

Finally, he caught up and grabbed her arm. “No, it wasn’t like that. She was thanking me for saving her life.”

Tessa’s eyes filled with tears. “Damn it, you’re a womanizer and you expect me to believe you?”

Were they ever going to get over her beliefs of him cheating on her? No matter what he did or said, she always came back to the errors of his previous life.

Anger filled him. “You were all I could think about. I prayed to God to let you be safe, and yet you seemed to think I was somewhere having fun with this woman.” Shaking his head, he stared at her. “No matter what I say, it’s never going to be enough, is it? You’re never going to trust me.”

Her bottom lip trembled. “All I could think about was where were you and if you were safe.”

“I wasn’t safe, damn it. I thought any moment I was going to be sucked up in that wild wind and never see you again.”

Suddenly the barker was yelling at everyone. “Meeting in the big tent now. Mr. Walcott wants to speak to everyone.”

Seth was so angry, he knew he needed to walk away before he said something he’d regret. He whirled, leaving Tessa to her suspicions.

## Chapter 23

Seth had not spoken to her since yesterday afternoon. Maybe she had overreacted a bit, but he was known for being with lots of women. Though she knew that, it would still hurt if she ever learned he had cheated on her.

Never had she been in love with any man. Seth was her first in every way possible, and though she didn't want to fall in love with him, she could feel her heart silently whispering *he's the one*.

But was he? She tried to ignore the whispers. She didn't want to care about him, and yet, more and more, she knew she was falling in love with him.

How did they get over this? She had just stepped into her railroad car to get her bags when the hail started yesterday. Alone, she rode out the tornado with that damn snake peeking out at her through the basket.

When it was over, she'd run out in search of Seth, fearing the worst, only to discover him with red lipstick covering his face.

This morning, the lady came to her and apologized and told her that he had saved her life. And she didn't doubt her, but yesterday brought up all her fears. Why in the world would this man want to be with her? No man had ever wanted her because she was ugly.

Why was Seth so interested?

Sometimes she felt like a man in a woman's body, and yet, she wanted to be a beautiful, accepted woman.

Right now, she felt so confused.

This time he hadn't been cheating but had saved that woman's life. But what about next time? What about when he realized how ugly she was and decided he would cheat. What about that time?

At this moment, she almost felt like she owed him an apology, but it was right before their show, and she couldn't. Not yet. Afterward, she would tell him she was sorry. Afterward, she would explain her feelings to him, but at the moment she wanted to hang onto her anger just a little longer.

She walked up to the big tent area and met him there.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

“Yes, what about you?”

“I can’t wait to let out some pent-up anger at you. Get prepared,” he said.

Oh, this was going to be interesting. Both of them were hurting with anger and the audience was going to witness the real thing. This fight wouldn’t be acted out, but real.

The announcer called their names and they walked out.

“We like to call our show the Battle of the Sexes,” Seth said.

“Oh yes,” she said, nodding. “It’s because he can’t win, and he can’t stand to lose.” She shrugged her shoulders. “It’s not fun to be him.”

“At least I don’t cheat to win,” he said.

“You don’t have to. You wear pants and you’re a man. But, oh no, the National Marksman Association is afraid of women. Afraid we’ll beat you men. And you and I both know who won that day before they revealed who I was during the competition.”

People needed to understand her frustration at being denied the state champion.

“Oh, honey, you don’t know this, but I had already figured out you were a woman. No man has a sweet little butt like yours.”

The crowd roared with laughter.

“Don’t talk about my butt in front of an audience,” she said.

“Those are dueling words. Prepare for a duel.”

“Fine and dandy,” he said. “Let’s see who the better shooter is.”

They lined up, back-to-back. “Last chance to back out,” he said.

“No way that’s happening,” she replied.

They stepped off the necessary steps, whirled around, and fired. Tessa’s arm twitched, throwing her aim was off. The bullet clipped Seth on the earlobe, sending fear spiraling through her. Oh my God, what had she just done?

She wanted to rush over to him but knew that would ruin their show. What had just happened? She’d never missed the target like that before. She could have killed him. Just the thought made her nauseous.

Fear grabbed her. She loved this man. Oh my God, she loved him and could have killed him.

He glared at her. “That was a little too close.”

She didn’t have a response. All she could do was continue with the show when she really wanted to tell him she was sorry.

“Why don’t you shut up and shoot or are you afraid?”

The words sounded so cold, even to her. What was she doing? She was destroying everything when she only wanted to run to him and confess her feelings.

She lifted her pistol and shot out the bull's-eye on the target.

Seth lifted his pistol and did the same on his target. They were tied with him having a slight advantage with the duel mark she'd missed.

Now every time she fired a shot, she feared missing and harming someone.

She lay down in the ring and fired her rifle. Three shots, but somehow on the last one, she misfired and missed the center. If he wanted to win, she had left the door open for him to beat her.

How many years had passed that she had not won a competition? How long since she lost?

His brown eyes glinted with anger as he raised his rifle and fired three consecutive shots into the black dot. He'd won. Fair and square, he'd won.

He took the celebratory lap around the ring and the crowd cheered while she walked out of the ring and the tent. She locked her guns in her trunk and then she all but ran down the street.

She didn't know where she was going, but she had to get away. She'd lost. She'd almost shot and killed Seth. What was wrong with her?

This was the man she loved, and she couldn't stand the thought of her shooting him. But she'd nicked his ear and caused him to bleed. This time it was just a nick, but what if she missed again?

She ran into the nearest saloon, slid up to the bar, and ordered a whiskey. The man brought her a sniffer glass and she downed it. She ordered a second one. This time she drank it slower, knowing she had to find her way home tonight alone.

Suddenly he was standing beside her. "What the hell happened back there? Were you trying to kill me?"

Tears welled in her eyes and she shook her head. "No. My arm quivered. It's never done that before, and for a split second, it shook just enough that my bullet creased your earlobe. I'm so, so sorry."

He closed his eyes and ordered a drink. "You scared the hell out of me. I thought you were trying to kill me."

"No, in fact if anyone has a right to be mad, it's you. Joan came over and talked to me this morning and told me that you saved her. She's madly in love with the lion tamer and said she would never

want to cause a relationship problem. I was wrong.”

He stared at her. “Did you let me win tonight?”

“No, I did not. Honest to God, I never let anyone win. Everything felt off tonight. We were off, the shooting was off, it was like no matter what I did, it was wrong.”

It was true, nothing felt right since yesterday when the tornado struck their camp. It was like Columbus, Ohio, didn’t want them here.

She reached up and ran her hand down his face and then she gently touched his bandaged ear. Closing her eyes, she leaned in and kissed his cheek. “I’m sorry for everything that’s happened. It was all my fault.”

“God, Tessa, you scared me,” he said.

“Scared myself,” she said. “I’ve never had my arm shake like that.”

The bartender put the class of whiskey on the bar. Seth downed one and asked for another.

“And the way we were fighting in the arena, we’ve never been so angry at one another.”

“Yes,” she said. “And I won’t battle you if I’m that angry again.”

“That’s why I thought you had shot me on purpose,” he said.

She glanced at him, all the love inside her shine through her gaze. “No, never.”

A saloon was not the place to tell a man you loved him. And she wasn’t even certain they were back together.

The bartender put two more whiskeys in front of them. They downed them and then they looked at each other.

“I want to be alone with you,” he said, leaning into her, whispering into her ear.

“Me too,” she said.

“Come on, let’s go,” he said.

She smiled. “Only if we won’t argue anymore. I’m tired of fighting you, Seth. I can’t do it anymore.”

“Good, because fighting is not what I have in mind.”

# Chapter 24

Drunkenly, they stumbled up the stairs of the hotel room Seth had acquired. She knew she was playing with fire, but to spend time in his arms away from the prying eyes of the people in the show would be wonderful.

After today, she felt like she needed to show him how much she loved him, because she did love him. When she realized how close that bullet came to his head, she'd been terrified. That's when she knew for certain that she loved him. That's when she almost ran out of the arena screaming she couldn't do this anymore.

And once she had gotten the chance she had run. Run from the terror that gripped her inside. For she loved a man who loved women and she feared for her heart.

Unlocking the door, his hands trembled with the key. Was he as nervous as she was?

Once inside, he reached for her. His arms pulled her against him. His lips moved over hers and he kissed her like it was their last. His lips ravaged hers, and she met his fervor, gripping his body close to hers.

She needed him.

For what felt like months, she'd fought him, but right this moment, she desired him like her next breath.

Today had opened her eyes and made her realize how much she loved him.

With her hands, she pushed open his shirt, wanting to touch his skin, feel his chest. Forever, they'd lived on the edge with this incessant need for each other. No more. She wanted him and she wanted him now. Consequences be damned.

Today she almost killed him and with every note from her would be admirer, she feared what would happen next. She wanted Seth before she took her last breath. If she were going to die, she wanted it to be in his arms and not because some man thought he deserved her.

She ran her hands over his hard chest muscles, his flesh rippling beneath her touch while his lips continued their assault on hers.

Her breathing was labored, and an ache began between her legs unlike anything she'd felt before.

Their lips broke apart. "God, I want you so much," he said, his hands caressing her face.

"Stop talking and show me what it feels like to make love."

Pulling out of his arms, she raised up and unbuttoned the western costume she still had on. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest, coursing blood through her veins, and she knew she was taking a risk, but she didn't care.

Her only fear was that he would reject the ugly duckling. What if he saw her body and said no? What would she do then? What if he looked at her and said never again?

Fear spiked through her, and she glanced at him, still standing by the door watching her.

"You're beautiful," he said as if he could read her mind and eased her fears.

"You're just saying that to make me feel better."

"No, I mean every word. The slenderness of your body, your waist so tiny, I could almost span it with my hands. Your hips full and rounded and that pert little butt that gives you away as being a woman."

A blush heated her cheeks. Tears welled in her eyes as she realized he thought she was beautiful.

"Seth," she whispered as she stared into his glassy eyes shining with a fire that drew her to his flame. A shudder rippled through her at the knowledge of the chances she was taking, willing to accept whatever risks their joining brought.

Tonight, she wanted this man because she loved him. Because she feared losing him.

Frantically, before she could change her mind, she pulled his shirt out of his pants. While he undid the buttons, she pulled the garment from his body. When the shirt was removed, he reached up and grabbed her head, bringing her lips to his again. His lips conveyed a message of desire and longing and oh, sweet Jesus, want.

She opened her mouth, greedily accepting his unspoken acknowledgment of passion. Her blood seared through her veins heating her everywhere.

Their lips broke apart and he placed his mouth on her neck as he nibbled softly to the curve of her shoulder. "Are you sure?"



"Yes, no more questions," she whispered in the glow of the lantern. She knew for certain that at this moment she needed Seth.

Tomorrow she might regret her decision, but not tonight. Tonight was theirs.

Lifting her chemise, he tugged the garment over her head, exposing her breasts.

"Oh God," he said as he lowered his mouth to her puckered nipple, tenderly sucking the tiny bud. A burst of fire flooded her and she gasped, throwing her head back, arching her chest toward his mouth. The sensation flooded her with desire for this man, a man with a reputation for the ladies, whose kind, gentle soul she loved. No matter what tomorrow brought, they had each other tonight.

His hand gripped her breast as his tongue lavished her nub, filling her with a sweet ache that radiated all the way to her toes. He gently laid her on the bed, rose, and quickly shucked his pants and boots.

In the light, she could see him in all his naked glory. His manhood jutted out from his body like a weapon looking for a shield.

"So that's a penis," she said softly.

He laughed then reached down and untied her boots. They fell to the ground with a clunk as he slid her stockings down her legs. His fingers reached for her pantaloons and she lifted her hips to help him remove the garment.

Lying naked before his eyes, for a moment she doubted her decision. His gaze traveled over her breasts, her hips, and then back again. Had he changed his mind? Did he find her slender breasts disgusting? Did he not like the ugly duckling?

"Tessa, you're beautiful. Never forget how breathtaking you are."

She was giving herself to a womanizer. A broke man from a wealthy family who was learning to live on his earnings. A man with dreams, and she wanted him like she wanted nothing before. She needed Seth.

He crawled up on the bed beside her until they lay side by side, their naked skin touching. His lips covered hers once again and the heat that had been simmering burst inside her like an explosion of fire, sizzling her from head to toe.

Tessa ached to touch him, to feel his skin beneath her fingertips.

She reached out and trailed her fingers down his face, to his chest, feeling the hardened muscles beneath her touch. His muscles rippled beneath her strokes and she slid her fingers all the way down his waist to his shaft.

His hand wrapped her fingers around his cock and she moved her hand up and down. She gripped his erection, touching the tip, feeling the bulbous head on the end.

She'd never seen a man's penis, let alone touched one. For a moment, she was in awe of the power and the strength in his erection.

At the touch of his fingers between her legs, she gasped at the zing of feelings that radiated from her center. She moaned as his fingers caressed her intimately, touching her like she'd never been touched, creating a need she'd never experienced. He stroked her until she was wet with want and filled with a raging desire that had her arching against his hand.

"Seth," she cried unsure of the feelings he was evoking. The need. The passion.

His lips covered hers, raking the inside of her mouth with his tongue teasing and dancing, retreating while he shifted his body over the top of hers.

She knew what came next, had dreamed of being with the right man. He guided his penis to her entrance and then surged ahead, powerful and yet tender--and met a wall of resistance.

After this night, she would no longer be a virgin, but she didn't care. All she wanted was this man inside her. To hell with tomorrow. At this time, only tonight mattered. Only Seth mattered.

Slowly he pushed forward, and she felt the barrier give way as she cried out. Pain replaced pleasure. This was what the marriage bed was all about. This was what her mother had told her, and yet, she'd left out so many details.

He paused for a moment. "It'll soon pass."

She reached up needing him to continue, wanting this man to finish what he'd started. She pulled his mouth to hers and then she moved her hips in a way she'd never experienced before. A gentle shove that made him slide in deeper, filling her.

"Oh," she moaned, her insides gripping him.

He groaned as he moved within her. He drove himself into her body and she welcomed each thrust. Heat spiraled through her, building each time he plunged into her with an intensity she

couldn't believe.

"Seth," she moaned, "what's happening?"

His face was tense and full of pleasure, his eyes boring into hers, lifting her and carrying her with him. "Tessa."

She met his thrusts with equal force, each stroke spiraling desire higher and higher in her, pushing her toward some unknown crest.

Then she was falling, tumbling over the peak and plummeting, falling as her body tensed and shudders shook her deep to her core. Seth's mouth locked on hers as he held onto her, thrusting into her one more time as his body tensed around her.

He released her mouth and slumped down over her. "Oh my, what just happened?"

She lay there panting, her body slowly recovering, amazed at what they had done. His breathing slowed, his eyes closed, his chest rising and falling before he rolled to his side and pulled her into the crook of his arm.

Why did this feel so natural? Like this was where she belonged. Like this man was made for her.

She lay panting, letting the warm afterglow recede as she stared up at him.

"This was your first time," he said softly, his fingers running through her hair.

"Does it matter?" she asked.

"No, but I feel honored that you shared your first time with me."

He rolled over, pinning her to the bed. "This has been building between us since that first kiss."

"Yes," she said softly. "And I want to do it again."

He laughed. "Tessa, that was beautiful. Extraordinary, and yes, we're most definitely going to do it again."

A sigh escaped her. "Just don't hurt me, Seth. That is what I fear the most."

"Me too," he said. "I fear you will hurt me. Maybe even shoot me."

"That was not on purpose," she said, wishing that misfire had never happened.

"I know. But I also fear you hurting me. Of you leaving me."

He moved on top of her, his chest against her own. She wanted nothing more than for him to take her again.

She could feel him hardening against her leg. "Seth, something is happening."

“Yes,” he said. “And this time it’s going to be even better.”

Warmth spread through her, and she gazed up into Seth’s eyes, lost in the passion she saw there.

As much as she loved him, she wanted him again and again. Maybe even forever.

# Chapter 25

The next morning, Seth slowly awakened. He was stiff and tired, and his leg hit a naked female leg. His eyes popped open and he remembered what had happened the night before. How Tessa had nicked his earlobe with her bullet. How they had fought and he found her at the saloon, drinking alone, crying. Somehow they made their way to this hotel room.

He reached to the beside table and grabbed his pocket watch. The train left in thirty minutes. They had to make the train or be left behind.

Part of him didn't care if they remained, but he still needed more money and this was Tessa's dream.

"Wake up, it's late. We have thirty minutes before the train leaves," he said, jumping out of bed.

Tessa stretched, the sheets barely covering her, before she yanked the blankets up high.

"Thirty minutes," she said, her eyes widening. "What the hell have we done?"

A grin spread across his face. "We made love. And it was the best night of my life."

She glanced up at him coyly, blankets tucked high around her neck, her sapphire eyes gazing at him with an emotion he wasn't certain of.

Last night, they had made love into the wee hours of the morning. And if they had awoken in time, he would have done so again and again. But if they wanted to stay with the wild west show, then they had to get a move on.

"Come on, we are going to miss the train," he said.

"I'm naked."

"Yes, and I've seen everything, so don't dawdle. Get up and get dressed."

The woman was acting like last night didn't happen. She was acting like she didn't want him to see her body and he'd explored every inch of her beautiful curves. There was nothing left to hide.

Finally, she threw back the covers and grabbed her dress.

"Everyone is going to know we slept together. Everyone is going to know when they see me in my costume. Everyone will know that the womanizer had me."

She seemed to regret what they had done last night, and he was sick of her calling him a womanizer. This morning should be a happy time and Tessa wasn't acting like she enjoyed last night.

"Stop calling me a womanizer. You're the only woman I've had since long before we started this journey."

Anger sparkled along his spine and trailed all the way to his fist. Since he'd met her, no other woman had interested him, and yet she was too blind to see his devotion to her.

She turned and gazed at him in her bloomers and camisole. "But you have a reputation."

"And so do you," he replied. "Not as a womanizer, but as a woman determined to win."

A frown settled on her face, and he could see she was struggling with her emotions. Something had changed between them last night and she didn't know how to handle this morning.

"Sometimes when a man likes women and is not willing to just settle for the first one that comes along, he likes to check out several women before deciding on his final choice. That's me. No, I don't sleep with them all, but I'm determined to make certain I've found the right woman before I promise someone forever."

She pulled the costume over her head. "A woman can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because then we're considered a slut."

"Not if you don't sleep with them," he said.

She turned and glanced at him with tears in her eyes. "I slept with you. We spent the night making love and—"

This was the problem. She didn't know how to handle the morning after. He crossed the room and wrapped his arms around her. "And it was the best night of my life."

He wiped the tears from her eyes. "Let's continue on with the show and see what happens."

With a sniffle, she nodded. "I'm scared."

"Don't be. I'm right here by your side and we'll face the other performers together. Don't let anyone treat what happened between us last night as something bad. Let's just take things slow and see what happens."

See whether she tries to shoot him again. He didn't think she

meant to, but still it had scared him senseless. It was all he could do to continue with the performances, but somehow he had and so had she.

“You beat me last night,” she said.

“Did you let me since you nicked my ear?”

“No, I’ve already told you. My arm twitched, and after that, I couldn’t get it together again. No matter how hard I tried, it seemed like I was off.”

Last night had definitely not been her best shooting and he was surprised he had beat her.

“It’s a new week and we’ll get to do it all again in a few days,” he told her. “But, for now, we need to go.”

Tessa glanced around the room one more time.

“Come on, we’re going to be lucky to make the train.”

They rushed out of the room and all but ran to the train depot where everyone was loaded but them.

“I can’t believe I slept with you,” she said breathlessly running.

Why was she having a hard time accepting that they had been together? What had happened last night between them was beautiful. The best sex of his life and she was ruining it by questioning what she had done.

This was what would tear them apart. Her questioning his every move, his decisions, and doubting what happened between them. It was time she learned to trust him.

“Stop trying to ruin it. Accept what happened and realize that it’s not always that beautiful.”

She halted right in front of the train.

“You don’t know the risks I took,” she said.

He took her by the elbow and shoved her up the steps of the train.

“Get on board,” he commanded as he hauled himself up the steps.

Turning, she glared at him. “Don’t tell me what to do.”

“Then stay behind,” he said. “You have complained all morning when it should be one of the happiest mornings of your life.”

“Why? Just because I slept with you?”

Laughter resounded around them and Seth glanced up to see most of the members of the show sitting in their seats watching them.

Damn!

Tessa turned and glared at him. "Now see what you've done. Everyone knows."

It was all he could do not to pick her up and carry her to a seat where he would turn her over his knee and give her the spanking she deserved

"If you would have just gotten on the train and sat down, none of this would have happened."

"It's not my fault, it's yours," she said.

He grabbed her by the hand and hauled her to the last seats on the train just as the wheels started to roll.

Taking a deep breath, he released it slowly. "Tessa, if you would have boarded the train, then none of this would have happened. Frankly, I don't care whose fault it is. Now, please sit there, shut up, and let me have some peace. And, damn it, if you shoot me again, we're done."



# Chapter 26

Tessa sat next to Seth on the train and watched the scenery rolling by on their way to their next stop. Why was she acting this way?

Yes, she was scared about how last night had affected their relationship. He never said he loved her, talked of marriage, or any of the things she thought a man would discuss after having sex with a woman.

What happened now? How did they go forward if she had been just someone to roll around in bed with?

With a sigh, she stared out at the fields of corn, maze, and wheat as they crossed the country. In two days, they would arrive in Atlanta, Georgia, where they would do a show. Right now, they were set to end in New York City and she had every intention of visiting Rose.

As the day waned, she realized she had dozed off.

“You’re tired. Why don’t you go to your car and lie down. Get some sleep.”

With a sigh, she knew he was right. Maybe it would be good for them to each have alone time to consider what had happened last night. It had been wonderful, but this morning, she woke frightened at how vulnerable she was.

Standing, she made her way through the train cars to the one she shared with the women.

When she opened the door, she noticed it was empty. Glancing around, she checked to make certain all her things were in their place. Everything was as it should be. Quickly, she took off her show outfit and changed into a soft cotton gown.

Leaning over the bunks, she pulled the covers back and that’s when she saw the note. Trembling, she picked it up and began to read.

*Dearest Tessa,*

*Your man can tattle to Mr. Walcott all he wants, but that’s not going to stop me. Soon, very soon, I’m going to claim you and make you mine after we compete against one another for the best marksman.*

*I know you think you’re the best, but I will beat you. Soon, very*

*soon, you'll be mine. Tell Seth I don't like to share.*

*Your Admirer*

Trembles wracked her body and tears streamed down her cheeks. Why would this man not leave her alone? And how would he feel now that the whole show knew she and Seth spent the night together?

Just then the car door opened and Ethel walked in.

"You're crying. What's wrong?"

She handed her the note. The woman sighed and shook her head. "I've gotten some strange notes in my time, but this weirdo is creepy."

And he seemed determined. She knew that sooner or later, there would be a confrontation and she hoped and prayed she'd be prepared.

"I'm frightened, Edith. I'm afraid he's going to somehow capture me."

Ethel tried to reassure her. "Thank goodness, we're almost at the end of this tour. I don't know about you, but I'm ready to spend some time at home not always being on the move. Maybe you will get away from him before he comes for you."

"I hope so," she said.

That sounded heavenly. This last month had been the most exciting, challenging month of her life. She was ready for some relaxation time.

"I think you should start sleeping with that pistol of yours. That way if anyone ever breaks in, you're ready."

What the woman didn't know was that she already did that. After the snake incident, she put her pistol beneath her pillow. That way it was always handy.

"What else is wrong, honey. You seemed all out of sorts with Seth this morning. Is he not a good lover?"

That made Tessa laugh. Oh how she wish she could tell her no, but it wasn't true. "Last night was my first time. It was wonderful. Better than I ever dreamed, but he didn't say he loved me or that he wanted to marry me. We were rushed this morning, but still I thought he would say something. I needed some kind of reassurance."

She sank down onto her bunk.

Ethel sighed and shook her head. "Tessa, sweetie, a man is not obligated to say he loves you or ask you to marry him. In fact, most

don't. This is why proper women wait until they're married before they let their husbands have them. But when you're passionate, like you obviously are, most of the time you won't wait for marriage. Don't give up on him."

Tessa sniffed. "But how do I act? I know I love him. I'm just confused as to where we go from here. What is he feeling? Was I just another of his women?"

Ethel stretched out on her bunk across the small cabin. "Now is the hard part. You can't cling to him because you have no right, and yet, you can't return to the way you were acting before because things are different between you. When you have sex, it changes the relationship."

"This morning, we were in such a hurry, and he kept telling me to take things slow and see what happens."

"And that's what you need to do. As much as I hate to say this, you need to act like nothing has changed between you. Act like last night didn't happen. That will shock him. Make him be the one to continue the pursuit."

She thought about Ethel's advice. That would be so hard but clinging to him and waiting and expecting a declaration of love from him, would do no good.

"What if he doesn't continue to pursue me. What do I do then?"

Ethel didn't respond but stared at her with sad eyes. "Just act like nothing is wrong and that everything is the same."

With a nod, she decided to do what Ethel said.

"So everyone on the train heard our discussion?"

A laugh came from Ethel's bunk. "Oh yes, we especially loved the part where you told him 'you don't know the risks I took.' That was a great line that women should be telling men all the time, because it's true. Even now you could be pregnant."

Tessa's heart skipped a beat. Pregnant. What in the hell would she do then? No, that couldn't happen.

"Most men are not around nine months later when the babe arrives. But maybe Seth will be different."

Dear God, she could not be pregnant. That would cinch her reputation in Fort Worth as being a really bad girl.

"I did especially like when you told him not to tell you what to do. Women need to stand up for themselves more. You keep on telling him that. Men need to hear it more."

In her mind, Tessa calculated when her next menstrual cycle

was due. Ten days from now, she should start her period. Ten days of holding her breath and praying.

Until then she would be even more frightened.

“Who do you think this creep is sending me notes? Could he be among the performers? Or could it be one of the workers?”

Ethel opened her eyes and shook her head. “I have no idea, but the man is persistent and that’s what frightens me. This is your fifth note from him? And even talking to Mr. Walcott didn’t frighten him.”

“That’s what scares me. And where and when will he decide to pounce.”

“Soon, because we only have two more stops before we reach New York,” she said. “Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. Then we’re off for the winter.”

New York. Rose. And then home. How would this all end?

# Chapter 27

A week later, Seth was walking through the arena before the show began in Philadelphia. Things between him and Tessa were strange. It was like she was before they had sex. Back to them being their normal bickering selves. Back to her being a little reserved and not depending on him.

In a way, he felt glad, but in other ways, he was sad. Never had he experienced sex that had been so fulfilling, so life changing. And yet, he didn't think she understood that what happened between them was special. So very special.

Afterward, he realized his heart was falling in love with her. He loved having sex with her, he loved her spirited attitude, and the urge to protect her was killing him. These secret admirer notes seemed more and more targeted and he feared for her. What she didn't know was that he was always near her, so he could keep an eye out for her. Protect her.

"Seth," one of the trapeze artists called to him. "Seth, honey, I need you to help me."

He glanced around wanting to make certain others were around.

"What do you need, Francisca?"

"Sweetie, could you lift this wire and carry it to the arena for me?"

"Of course," he said, opening the box and lifting out the coil. Why did they need this wire? Everything had been set up for two days and would be coming down tomorrow. They were being given Sunday off and he wanted to surprise Tessa with a night in town.

After the other night, he wanted to take her to dinner and then surprise her with a night in a hotel. Yes, it ate into his funds, but his woman deserved it. And she was his woman.

He carried the wire to where Francisca told him.

"Oh, thank you, so much," she said. "If you want to, my husband is gone to town and won't return for hours. We could spend some time together."

There was no way would he even think about something like that with a married woman. "I'm sorry, but Tessa would not

appreciate me spending time with another woman. And she's my girl."

With a sigh, the woman nodded. "Still, thank you for moving that wire for me. I do appreciate it."

"You're welcome," he said and walked away. Normally, Tessa would be somewhere close by. He liked to be near her side because of those mysterious notes she was receiving.

As he stepped out of the tent, he saw her walking through a field to practice. His guns were on him as he followed her.

The woman's backside had a nice swing to it, and he hurried to catch up. Yes, she still believed he was a womanizer even though he'd done nothing wrong. And instances like helping Fran didn't help.

But he no longer wanted any woman but the one in front of him. Tessa.

He ran, and when he reached her side, she glanced up at him and smiled. "Francisca needed some help?"

"Yes, she asked me to move a coil of heavy wire. I did and now I'm going to practice with you."

"Good," she said.

"Oh, by the way, if you're not busy Saturday night after the performance, I would love to take you to dinner."

A grin spread across her face. "Really?"

"Yes, really," he said.

"Like a real courting date?"

Sadly, their performances kept them from doing much courting. And since they were on the move all the time, their situation was rather unique. But Saturday night he wanted to be special.

"That's right. Of course, if someone else has asked you, I'll be so hurt."

Laughing, she reached out and hit him on the arm. "No one else has asked me, though that creepy guy is still sending notes. It seems like every time we're performing, he leaves me a message."

If Seth ever caught this guy, he feared the stranger would be full of bullet holes when he finished with him.

"We're going to find out who he is," he said. "And when we do, he's going to be sorry."

Tessa hung a target on a tree. "You first."

He took aim and hit the target, knocking out the bull's-eye. In his mind, the eye belonged to the man who kept sending the

descriptive messages. This secret admirer left Seth feeling helpless and he wanted to protect her and keep her safe.

"Ethel told me we only have two more stops before this season comes to an end in New York. Before I head back to Texas, I want to see Rose perform. She's singing with the opera according to my last telegram from Sadie."

Seth had heard Rose sing one time and he would never forget how her voice seemed to resonate inside him.

"Can I come with you?"

Tessa turned and smiled at him, her eyes dancing with delight. "Of course. In fact, I would love for you to be my escort."

"My pleasure, madam."

He walked up to the tree to set up a second target for Tessa. When he returned, she steadied her arm and fired. Funny, how he no longer felt like he was competing with her.

They worked side by side practicing their shots, both of them equals. And that's how he hoped it would always be.

"If I open up my school in Fort Worth to teach children marksmanship, will you be one of the teachers?"

A smile crossed his face. No longer did she talk about being in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, but rather her school.

"What happened to Buffalo Bill's?"

She grinned. "I think the time we've traveled with Mr. Walcott has been enough for me. Are you going to want to continue?"

He grinned. "My plans are to be with you, wherever you are."

She turned and gazed at him. "Really?"

"Tessa, yes," he said.

"What about your ranch?"

"I'm hoping with the final pay we receive, I'll have enough. Like you, I really don't want to spend my life traveling with a show. This life is really not for me."

"Me either," she said with a gasp. "I love our part of the show, but I don't think I want to spend the rest of my life doing this."

He grinned at her. "So after we see Rose, we're headed back to Fort Worth?"

For a moment, she said nothing as she gazed at him. "Yes, I think so. Not unless something bigger and better comes along. My days of being a show-stopping markswoman will soon be over."

Happiness filled his heart. They were agreeing on their future, and he hadn't even asked her to marry him, yet. Soon, when

everything was settled, he would get down on one knee. Because Tessa was who he wanted to spend his life with.



# Chapter 28

Tessa couldn't wait until after tonight's show when she and Seth were going to dinner. It was hard to play at being hateful when all she really wanted to do was tell the audience, and him, she loved him.

"How about that shot, Miss Harris," he said. "Beat that one."

She grinned at him. "Sweetie, you know I can. You know I can beat you and you know that tonight when you lie down to sleep, my face will be the last one you see."

Of course, she would be sleeping with him tonight and she couldn't wait. Suddenly a wave of dizziness hit her. What in the hell was going on? Was it the excitement? The heat?

She stumbled backward. Oh no, she was going to pass out right here in front of everyone.

"Seth..." she said as the darkness like a curtain closed in around her.

"Tessa," he screamed as he rushed to her side, all acting forgotten.

In the background, she could hear the crowd screaming, but she couldn't open her eyes.

The medicine show doctor ran to her side. "Get me some smelling salts."

It was weird that she could hear them, but could not respond. Was she dying?

The weather was hot, but not unbearable.

Suddenly a whiff of ammonia had her sputtering and coughing. She pushed the smell away and opened her eyes.

"Oh," she cried. "What happened?"

"You fainted," Seth said.

"I never faint," she replied. "That's what silly women do."

How embarrassing to faint during a show. Never in her life could she remember passing out and never in front of a crowd. What did this mean?

Many of the performers were standing around her in a circle protecting her from the eyes of the audience. They laughed and

clapped their hands.

"She's back," Ethel said, her snake curled around her neck, his tongue slithering at her.

"Help me up," she said to Seth. "Let's continue the show."

"No, I don't think we should. Something's not right," he said, eyeing her suspiciously.

With a sigh, she knew she had to give him a plausible excuse. "I'm all right. I didn't eat, saving space for the delicious dinner you're buying me tonight. I think I should have eaten something."

He shook his head, his worried eyes narrowing behind the full dark lashes. "You're sure? You're not going to shoot me, are you?"

"Not unless you stand in front of my gun," she told him as he helped her rise.

The performers laughed and walked away.

"Sorry, folks, no food and the heat seemed to have gotten to me," she said. "Let's get this target shooting done, so we all know who the real winner is."

She aimed her gun and began to fire and when she was finished, she knew she'd won once again.

"Battle of the Sexes, the lady takes the prize," the announcer said as they waved and walked off the field.

In that moment, she felt her bones start to ache. She was exhausted, and yet, she wanted tonight with Seth.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she said. "I'll be even better when you get me some food."

"Let's change and go," he said. "We're not going to be here for the final promenade around the arena. I'll just tell them you had to eat."

She grinned and skipped off to her tent. When she walked in, she saw the note lying on her bed. She wanted to scream, but instead, put it under her pillow and walked out.

Not tonight.

Seth was waiting for her and they walked out of the area toward town. In the downtown area, they found a place serving southern cooking and hurried in to be seated at a table overlooking the busy street.

"Are you certain you're feeling all right?"

"I'm fine. Just hungry."

And eager to spend time with Seth. It seemed like forever since

they had been alone. Last week, they didn't have the chance to be together and she doubted they would next week either.

One more city before they were done. Washington D.C. and then New York City where everything would be unloaded and stored. The animals would stay in Washington and be sent to Florida where they would stay for the winter.

In New York City, Mr. Walcott would hand them their final paycheck and tell them the dates to return. Only Seth and Tessa would not be coming back to the medicine show.

"Three more shows before the Battle of the Sexes ends," he said.

"Yes, that's kind of sad," she said, glancing at him.

"Are you going to compete in the championship in Washington?"

"No," he said. "I don't think so. I would love for you to compete for me, but I don't know how we could do that."

She laughed. "Seth, you won. Go ahead and compete. I'll even watch you."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, after being in a traveling show, I'm just not interested in the competition."

It was a lie, but she wanted him to feel better about attending. She would have given anything to participate, but that would never happen. So he should compete and win.

"And you will come watch me?" he asked.

"I wouldn't miss it," she said, knowing that going was considered an act of love to him. This had been her dream, and now, she wanted him to be the champion where she would root for him.

"Do you want a whiskey?"

"No, I don't think so," she said. "Tonight, I want to make certain I'm all here with you."

A grin spread across his face and the urge to reach out and stroke his cheeks almost overcame her.

"I bought you something," he said.

She licked her lips, her nerves jumping inside her like a Mexican bean gone wild. Was it an engagement ring?

Whatever it was, she had to act excited and not show her disappointment if it wasn't a wedding proposal.

He handed her a gift-wrapped package. The man was trying to save money to buy his ranch. Tonight, he'd bought her a gift, taken

her to dinner, and they would spend the night in a hotel.

What had she given him?

Curious, but instinctively knowing it wasn't a ring, she tore off the gift wrap. She lifted the lid and inside was a half heart necklace.

"I have the other half of the heart." He opened his shirt and showed her how he had tied the gold onto a rawhide strap he wore around his neck. "Together, the pieces make a whole heart. And that's what you mean to me. You're the other half of my heart."

While she would have loved to hear him say that he loved her, she knew this was just as good as the words. This was his way of saying *don't give up on me and eventually I'll be ready to confess my feelings*.

"I love it," she said. "Please put it on me."

He tied the necklace around her neck. "Now you'll always have my heart with you."

Tears welled in her eyes as she gazed at him. What would their relationship be like when they returned to Texas? Would Nellie try to break them apart? Would the other women in town try to steal him away?

Just then their food arrived, and while she wasn't really hungry, she knew she had to eat. Especially with him watching over her.

Before they ate, he raised his water glass to hers. "To a great experience traveling with a wild west show, but to going home and creating a new beginning."

"Yes," she said, hoping that new beginning included her.

## Chapter 29

Putting the key in the lock, Seth slowly opened the hotel room door. When he glanced over his shoulder at Tessa, he noticed she seemed even more nervous than the last time they spent the night together. She was biting her lip, her eyes wide with expectation and something that looked like desire. He stood there for a moment, letting them both anticipate what was about to happen before he would release the hunger for Tessa raging through him.

She met his gaze head on, her breathing quick and shallow. She wanted this as much as he did, and her desire sent him over the edge. He walked into the room, pulling her inside, and shut the door. As soon as the lock clicked behind him, he pushed her against the wooden panel, his body covering hers, pressing into her soft voluptuous curves, his rock-solid erection snug against her womanly mound, his mouth coming down hard against hers.

She moaned deep in her throat, and he relished the sound. While his lips never left hers as he caressed her sweet mouth, his hands were busy working the buttons at the back of her dress, needing to reach her skin, to feel that soft, satiny flesh beneath his fingertips.

Abruptly, she broke the seal of their mouths and began to frantically tear at the buttons on his shirt. "I want to touch you all over."

"Yes," he whispered, barely able to talk, his need for her so great.

When he finished undoing her fastens, he gently shoved the beautiful dress to the floor. Then he reached for her chemise. Quickly, he pulled it over her head and pushed down her pantaloons, leaving her in her stockings.

Her fingertips trailed from his neck down to his waist where she unbuttoned his pants. He reached down and pulled off his boots and socks. As he thrust his pants to the floor, she slid his shirt off his shoulders. He watched as she rolled down her stockings. Then they were standing naked, breathing hard and staring at one another.

Simultaneously, they swayed toward one another, reaching out

at the same time, as he pulled her mouth to his, wanting to feel her beautiful lips against his. A moan filled the air, and he was shocked to realize the sound came from him as he crushed her mouth beneath his own, hunger guiding and filling him.

Tessa was his woman. Tonight, he would worship her body and show her how she had stolen his heart, and hopefully, he would forge his heart with hers. Though he had yet to say the words, he knew she had stolen his heart. Tonight, he planned on showing her just what she meant to him.

Breaking the seal of their lips, he leaned his forehead against hers. "Do you know how much I want you? How hard it is for me to see you every day and not be able to touch you?"

"Yes, because I want you," she said, her voice soft, her breath whispery.

"No one has ever made me feel like you do. No one has made me want to fight heaven and earth to be with them." He walked backward to the bed in the center of the room.

A shiver went through her.

"Are you all right? Are you cold?" He pulled her down with him to the bed.

"I'm not cold. I'm hot with need for you," she said, her fingertips running down his chest, his stomach, to his manhood. She wrapped her hand around him, and he groaned with pleasure. He felt full to bursting with need for her as she stroked him.

"Then let me fix that for you because I ache for you," he said as he gripped her head, holding her mouth hostage, his fingers tangling in her hair, not letting her escape his kiss.

Then he slid his hands down her neck to her shoulders and farther until he reached her chest. Cupping her pale globes, he released her mouth and leaned down to lift the soft weight of her breast to his lips. Gently, he tugged on her nipple, sucking as much of her into his mouth as he could, as she bucked wildly against him, moaning deep in her throat.

Her breathing was ragged as her hands moved to his head, trapping him against her breasts as she strained, trying to give him more access to her body.

He moved his hand down, skimming over her flat stomach, until he touched her womanly folds.

"Seth," she groaned. "Is it always this good between a man and a woman?"

“No, honey, what we have is so damn special.”

The words were almost his undoing. Tessa was his fate. His woman. The one for him and tonight was proving that to him.

Pulling his mouth off her breast, he watched as passion filled her eyes, and she gazed at him with longing.

“You are like the other half of that heart to me. Your body and my body make one,” he said as he parted her folds and delved inside her. Slowly, he stroked her, watching her face change.

Her hands gripped the quilt as his fingers brought her pleasure. Honey flowed, a natural lubricant that told him he was doing something right. Her body tightened around him, and she cried out, shuddering as her passion-filled eyes stared straight into his soul.

It was like they were one. No beginning and no ending.

Smiling, he parted her legs with his. Her body fit perfectly against him, her breasts touching his chest, her hips supporting him, his manhood nestled between the juncture of her thighs, right where he belonged. Only him and no one else. She belonged to him.

Unable to hold back any longer, he entered her in a single swift movement. Filled with passion, he knew they belonged together. They were meant to be man and wife. They were meant to be one.

“You feel so good,” she whispered into his ear. “Take me, make me yours.”

“Tessa,” he whispered. “This is where I belong. Inside you and no one else.”

Staring into her eyes, he felt they were connected as one as he moved inside her, stroking her, loving her. Clutching his back, she clung to him as they rode the waves of passion, holding onto to one another.

Love filled his heart, and he knew he would give Tessa the sun, the moon, and the stars if he could. All the fake bickering and arguing only showed him that they were better as one.

How could he live without her? How would she feel about being a rancher’s wife?

This woman had taken on the challenges of living and working in a wild west show. He honored and adored her strength and perseverance. She was everything he wanted, and he’d spend the rest of his days showing her his love, protecting and honoring her.

But first he wanted to make her his wife.

A tightening spiral of pleasure filled him, and as much as he wished he could last longer, he couldn’t.

“Seth!” Tessa called out as he felt her body convulsing with pleasure.

His manhood tightened and swelled within her. With a guttural cry, he slammed into her body, shuddering his release. No matter what happened in their future, he would always remember tonight as the night he’d given her his heart. Something he’d never done with a woman before.

The womanizer had been claimed.

His heart was pounding, his breathing heavy, as he rolled them to their sides, pulling her snug against his body. She looked up at him, and he reached down and kissed her on the lips.

“Please don’t let this end when we get back to Texas,” she said, fear in her expression.

“Never,” he said, staring into her sapphire eyes. “Never.”



# Chapter 30

A week later, Tessa lay in bed thinking about the night that Seth never told her he loved her. No, he had not asked her to marry him, but they had talked about their future plans, and she felt certain that by the time they returned to Texas, she would be his wife.

Or at least, she hoped.

Odd that she had been feeling so different in the last two weeks. First fainting during a show, and even now, her breasts were so sore to the touch that she could barely wear clothes.

It was time to get up. They were in Washington D.C. and today was the marksman competition. Their last show was this evening. In some ways, she felt sorrow that it was over, but in others, she was ready to return to Texas.

She swung her legs over the side and immediately her stomach did a somersault. A paper bag lay near her trunk and she grabbed it. The contents of her stomach emptied and she took a deep breath.

Ethel walked in the cabin. "Oh my, you're sick. Did you just get up?"

"Yes," she said, trying not to throw up again.

"Your breasts sore?"

Oh, dear God.

"Yes," she said instinctively knowing Ethel's next question.

"You missed your monthly flow?"

There it was; the question that she wanted to avoid. She was two weeks late. No, she wasn't that late, but with the fainting, the sore breasts, and now the morning sickness, she was pretty sure she was expecting.

"Play with fire and you'll get burned," Ethel said. "My momma always kept crackers and some selzer water beside the bed. She said that helped the morning sickness."

Fear seized her and yet she also knew that she wanted this child so very much. This child was a creation of her and Seth. Their love made this baby and she would die protecting it.

"What am I going to do?"

"Tell Seth," Ethel said.

"No, because then he would insist on marrying me. If he doesn't love me, then I don't want to marry him. I have to know that he loves me before I can tell him about the child."

All she needed was some reassurance from him. In her heart, she believed he loved her, but she needed to know for certain. She needed to hear the words and then she would tell him.

"Well, then, you better hope he hurries, because in about four weeks, you're going to start getting a little bump there and then it grows bigger and bigger."

Stunned that Ethel knew so much about children, she couldn't resist asking, "Do you have children?"

She laughed. "I did, but my husband took them and disappeared. I haven't seen their precious faces since they were three and five. I doubt they would recognize me now. I barely recognize myself."

"How old would they be now?"

Tears welled in the woman's eyes. "They would be twenty and twenty-two. So many years have passed. I just pray that they are healthy and happy."

Fear seized Tessa. What if Seth never said he loved her and what if he disappeared with their baby? What would she do?

"Now, honey, I can see that mind of yours going crazy. Seth is nothing like my husband. He's a good man. Stop worrying and just enjoy this last show. Tomorrow we head to New York."

"This is also the day of the National Marksman Association competition," she said. "I should have been in that competition, but I'm going to go to support Seth."

Ethel smiled. "It's going to be a busy day."

She was right. This was the last show for her and Seth. They had informed Mr. Walcott that they would not be rejoining after they arrived in New York. They were going home to Texas and she couldn't wait to see her friends and family.

The adventure had been fun, but it was time to go home. Especially now that she was expecting. She ran her hand over her stomach. She and Seth had created a child. In seven and a half months, they would have a baby.

What kind of father would he be?

"Come on, Mr. Walcott is having a last meeting and giving everyone instructions. We'll also learn what kind of season we had and if there will be any extra pay."

Gingerly Tessa stood, and as soon as the room righted, she took a deep breath and released it slowly.

“You all right?”

“Yes,” she said. “I’m going to be just fine. Me and this baby will make it with or without the father.”

Though she really hoped Seth would eventually ask to marry her. She loved him with all her heart and she thought he loved her as well. And their baby needed a father.

“Let’s go to the meeting and then Seth and I will head out to the competition. You know, Ethel, I’m going to miss you.”

The older woman laughed. “Me too, Tessa. We may not have started on the right foot, but we eventually got there.”

“Where are the other girls?”

“Oh, Susie is shacking up with one of the tiger handlers. And Lucy has moved in with the man who shovels all the animal shit.”

Tessa shook her head. Life in a wild west show was certainly different. And not a good place to raise a child. Time to go home to Texas after she saw Rose.

# Chapter 31

As she and Seth walked into the arena of the championship competition, the pain of not being able to compete overwhelmed Tessa. Why was she here if she couldn't prove to all these men that she was the best?

*Because she loved Seth and she was here to support him.*

With a sigh, he turned from her. "You going to be all right?"

She gave him her best fake smile. "Yes. Now if I can't win, then you go out there and you bring home that trophy and the prize money. That money will buy a lot of cattle. Do you understand?"

He grinned at her and gave her a quick kiss on the lips.

"Steady breathing, focus on the target," she said.

"Yes, ma'am. I'll see you at the end," he said.

She watched him walk away then found a seat in the stadium. As much as she would have loved to have been competing, she knew he was supposed to be the champion and she was praying he would win.

"Tessa, I'm surprised to see you here," Mr. Lovell said, walking up beside her and sitting.

A quick glance at him and she smiled. "Seth is competing. I'm here rooting for him."

"Well, I will root for him as well," he said. Just great, this man was not going to leave her side.

"You know I'm a National Marksman Association Competition Champion. I won ten years ago. Proudest moment of my life," he told her.

This information surprised her. "I didn't know."

"You and Seth are not the only ones who are great marksmen," he said. "Look, the competition is about to start."

The men were divided into groups of four with only one advancing. The groups were drawn out of a hat and Seth was in group five. Forty men were competing, each had won their state championship.

There was no way she could have disguised herself to win. This championship was for Seth and she sat, saying silent prayers.

At the end of the first round, he had won in his group. The second round would be a little harder as they were now paired against one another. He was competing against a man from Louisiana.

“Would you like something to drink, dear? I could go get us each a glass of wine to sip while we watch the competition. He’s got at least two more rounds before the final one.”

“Thank you, but no,” she said to Mr. Lovell, wishing he would go away. Since she was pregnant, she was not drinking any alcohol. Maybe it wouldn’t harm the baby, but she wasn’t taking any chances.

“Oh, the man from Louisiana is very good. I don’t know that Seth can beat him,” he told her.

His words only irritated her as she gazed at the man she loved. “He can beat him.”

“You and Seth should come by the house tonight after the last performance. We could celebrate with dinner.”

Sitting with this geezer whose eyes were constantly wandering over her body like he could see beneath her dress was not someone she wanted to have dinner with.

“Thanks, but tonight is going to be very busy.”

Just then, Seth stepped up to fire at his targets. She held her breath, and when he finished, she smiled. He was doing great.

He glanced up at the stands and she knew he was looking for her. She blew him a kiss hoping he would see her.

“I thought you guys hated one another,” Mr. Lovell said.

“Oh, we did at one time, but things have changed. We’ve changed since joining the medicine show. But tonight is our last performance. We will not be returning next year.”

Mr. Lovell’s eyes widened. “Oh, really. Why not?”

“Seth is going to start a cattle ranch and I’m going to open my own marksmanship school. I want to teach younger children to enter competitions like this.”

The man frowned. “I was really hoping you would stay with the show. You’ve become our main attraction and I was going to press Mr. Walcott to offer you that spot in the show.”

“No thanks,” she said. “We really want to return to Texas.”

Seth was setting up again and she turned her attention back to his shooting. He hit the bull’s-eye dead center. She smiled and breathed a sigh of relief. The man from Louisiana missed and was

out.

Thirty minutes later, five men were left in the competition. Any one of them could win. The announcer called out their names and the men waved to the crowd. Now it became an individual contest.

When it came Seth's turn, he didn't miss a shot. In fact, she'd never seen him shoot as well as he was at the moment.

As each man was eliminated, she released a little breath she'd been holding. Finally, it came down to Seth and a man from Montana.

The two men lined up to do their last shots of the day. Seth didn't miss. He hit the center target, taking it out.

She sighed a big breath of relief.

The Montana man stood before the targets and hit every one dead center except for the last shot. That one went high.

Seth won!

Tessa jumped up and clapped. Mr. Lovell stood to at her side applauding, but she didn't get the feeling that he was as happy as Tessa was about Seth winning.

When he accepted the trophy and the check, he smiled. "I'd like to thank Tessa Harris for teaching me not only how to be a better marksman, but how to deal with life. This is for you."

Tears welled in her eyes and when it was over, she hurried down to the field.

"You didn't have to say that," she told him.

"But it's true," he said. "You've made me a better marksman. And a better man."

Just then Mr. Lovell walked up beside him. "Congratulations, Seth. I was a champion about ten years ago."

"Thank you," he said.

It was over. What had started months ago with her competing in a disguise as a man had culminated with Seth, the man she loved, winning the competition.

And she couldn't have been happier.

"We better go if we're going to make tonight's performance," Seth said.

"Yes, congratulations and have a great show tonight," Mr. Lovell said. "I'm going home to prepare for some guests coming over."

They parted ways and Tessa shook her head. "I'm glad he's gone. He sat with me the entire time and he still gives me the creeps."

Seth squeezed her into his side. "Tomorrow it's all over. Tomorrow we begin our lives again."

She smiled at him. "Yes, and I can't wait to see Rose."

# Chapter 32

The last show was over. At the end of their performance, he and Tessa had waved good-bye to the crowd. Holding hands, they walked out of the arena. At the last second, he'd kissed her and the crowd had gone wild.

It was over. Their time playing against one another in the Battle of the Sexes had come to an end.

And today he won the national championship. It had been a hell of a day and one he would never forget.

Tears rolled down her cheeks as they walked out of the tent. "I'm sad."

"Me too, but I still think it's best we quit now."

"I agree," she said. "But, still, I'm sad it's over."

He took her into his arms. "But it's not over between us."

She smiled. "No, it's not."

They heard a man clear his throat and glanced up to see Seth's father standing off to the side.

"Hello, son," he said. "Tessa."

"Papa," Seth said. "What are you doing here?"

"I was in town for a meeting of the southern mayors with the president. When I saw the flier that advertised the show, I knew I had to come see it and you."

Seth was so happy to see his father that he wanted to rush over and hug him. But something held him back.

"Could we have dinner?"

"Yes," Seth said.

"You're welcome to join us, Tessa," Mr. Robinson offered.

Tessa smiled at him and then at Seth. "No, I think you two should have some time alone. Besides, I've got to finish packing. We're headed to New York tomorrow."

Seth took her hand in his and squeezed it. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, you and your papa have a lovely dinner. I'll see you tomorrow before we leave for New York."

Already the crew was taking down the tent for the last time. In the morning, the train would leave for the city, and by tomorrow



afternoon, they would arrive.

A smile crossed his face and he leaned down and kissed her quickly on the lips. "Be careful."

"I will," she said. "I'm going to the tent, pack up my belongings, and spend one more night in that crummy bed."

"See you in the morning," Seth said. "Sweet dreams."

"You too," she said softly before she turned and walked away.

His father walked up to his side. "I've never seen you so interested in a woman. What's going on?"

Seth reached over and hugged his father, patting him on the back. No matter what happened between them, he was still his father, and he loved the man. "I love her, Papa, and I plan on asking her to marry me while we're in New York."

"I'm happy for you, son. Let's go to dinner and talk," he said.

"Let me change clothes and I'll be ready," he told him.

It took him fewer than five minutes to change out of his costume and into regular street clothes. In some ways, it was going to be sad to leave the show when they reached New York. But he was ready.

When they arrived at the restaurant, the two men sat opposite of one another. Once they had ordered their meal, his father sighed.

"I've changed my mind. If you will return to Texas, I will return the money from your trust fund and help you start a ranch."

While he knew this was costing his father a lot in pride, Seth no longer wanted his help. Not because he was still angry, but because he wanted to do this on his own and not be beholding to anyone.

"I appreciate that. But, Papa, I don't need your help. If you restore my trust fund, then I think I'll have enough money to buy the land and build a small house on it. I'm going to need one for Tessa and me. Then I want to buy some cattle and start building my herd."

His father's brows raised, and he smiled at him.

"One thing this trip has taught me is that I want to make it on my own. With this show, I've made enough money to buy what I need. Plus, I won the National Marksman Association competition. It had a nice money prize, which will help. In the months I've been gone, I've become my own man."

A grin spread across his father's face. "I'm so proud of you, son. You kept telling me you didn't want to work at the bank and I should have listened."

"Tessa and I had already decided that we no longer wanted to be

part of the show. It's been an experience, but we're ready to return home to Texas. We miss our friends and families."

His father's shoulders sagged with relief. "Your mother has been raising hell that I let you leave. But honestly, son, I'm so proud of the man you've become."

"Thanks, Papa. I wouldn't have done it without you," he said. His father had pushed him to his limits, but they had both gotten what they wanted.

"The family is going to be so happy to see you," he said.

"How's Nellie?"

The man snarled. "That girl creates more mischief. I don't know how she does it, but she can certainly stir up a pot of stink wherever she goes."

"I know how you can bring her down a notch."

"How?" his father asked.

"Tell her I'm going to ask Tessa to be my wife. That will get her going in a heart beat."

Laughter came from his father. "Tessa belongs to that Bad Girls' Club. I think your sister should join. I can't keep her out of trouble."

"Maybe she will now that Tessa no longer will be a member and Rose is in New York and Sadie is getting married in the next few weeks."

"And my son is going to get married," his father said tears welling in his eyes. "Your mother is going to be so excited."

"First Tessa has to say yes," he said, smiling, knowing that she would. Knowing that even though they had not said the word *love*, the emotion was written on their hearts.

As soon as they finished their dinner, his father walked outside the restaurant with him. He clasped him in his arms. "Hurry home, son, we miss you."

"I will, Papa. Just as soon as we visit Rose in New York. Tessa doesn't know it, but I contacted Sadie and Levi and they're on their way to the big city now. We're all going to be there together."

His father smiled. "Love you, son. Be careful and hurry home."

"Bye, Papa," he said, feeling nostalgic as they walked in opposite directions—him back to the show for one final night before they arrived in New York and his father back to Texas in the morning.

In the dark, he made his way toward the medicine show campgrounds, knowing in the morning, the train would leave as

soon as they were all packed. Just as he reached the big top, someone hit him in the head and knocked him out cold.

# Chapter 33

Tessa spent the evening telling the people in the show that she cared about good-bye. Yes, they would be together for one last train ride, but tomorrow would be a crazy day and she wanted to make certain they knew how much she appreciated them—mainly the cooks, costume designers, and those behind the scenes who made the show happen and never received credit for their work. Those were the people she wanted to tell good-bye.

Because she would not be returning. How could she with a baby?

It was dark when she made her way back to the railroad car. They would be leaving as soon as they broke all the equipment down.

When she walked in, Ethel was sitting there.

“You’re going to be upset,” she said.

“What?”

“Look on your bed,” she said. “It was there when I came in this evening. I swear to God, this crazy man is going to be fired.”

With trembling hands, Tessa opened the note.

*Dearest Tessa,*

*It’s time for our competition. Come alone and bring your guns. If you decide not to follow my instructions, just remember, I have taken as hostage someone you care about. Seth. He’s here with me and I won’t hesitate to use him for target practice.”*

*Your Admirer!*

She gasped. “No, he has Seth.”

There were instructions on how to reach the place where he wanted the competition held.

“I’m going with you,” Ethel said.

“No, you can’t. If anyone comes with me, he will shoot Seth. Please don’t follow me. If anything, try to hold the train as long as possible if we’re late.”

“I don’t like this one bit,” Ethel said. “The sheriff should be going with you.”

“No, he’ll kill the other half of my heart.”

With a sigh, Ethel watched her as she packed her supplies. When she was finished, Ethel reached out and hugged her. "Be careful. Take care of yourself and that baby. Don't let anything happen to you or its father."

"I won't. I'll do my very best," she said, fear spiking through her. "Here are all the notes. If something should happen, give these to the authorities. Maybe they can determine who our mystery man is."

"Please be careful," Ethel said.

"I will," Tessa acknowledged and then she looked at the directions one more time. An old baseball field on the other side of town. She would have to hire a carriage to get there.

She walked out of the railroad car and headed toward town. Her bag of bullets was draped across her chest. Her six-shooter was strapped to her waist and her rifle was slung across her back.

Armed and dangerous, she was ready to battle for the man she loved.

In some ways, she felt like she was going to war, and she was ready to put an end to this nonsense. This was the last night this admirer of hers would bother them.

On the street, a horse and buggy sat waiting, and she wondered if he was sent there by her admirer. She gave him the address and then crawled inside the carriage. Ten minutes later, they passed the baseball field and the driver continued on.

"Hey, you passed it," she said.

"I was told to deliver you to the house."

She stared at the large mansion sitting on a hill. The taxi carried her to the top. She tried to pay him, but he told her the fare had already been paid.

So the man had known she would come.

Getting out, she glanced around to scope out escape routes and then slowly walked to the front porch. The door opened and Mr. Lovell stepped out. "Tessa, welcome to my home."

"Where is Seth?"

"Oh, don't worry, he's here. Would you like a drink or some supper before we begin to play?"

"Are you the one who has been sending me these horrible notes?"

"I wouldn't call them horrible, just tantalizing and titillating."

"Maybe that's how you would describe them. I found them

vulgar,” she said.

The man smiled. “Do you want to eat before we begin our play?”

Did he really think this was just a social call? Oh hell no, she didn’t want anything from this man.

“No, I want to find Seth and leave. I don’t want to play your games.”

“Sorry, but that’s not an option,” he said.

“Why have you been tormenting me since I joined the show? Why did you insist on sending me horrible notes, telling me what you’re going to do to me? Nothing will ever happen between us.”

The man laughed and it was all she could do not to pull out her gun and shoot him. It was a very tempting thought.

“My dear, I love to play cat and mouse games with the women. Didn’t they tell you?”

“No, no one said a thing. I asked everyone and none of them admitted to someone doing this to them.”

The man clapped his hands. “Oh good. They’ve learned since the last time.”

A chill sparkled along her spine. He’d done this before? “What did you do?”

“It’s because they’re afraid. They know what I’m capable of and soon so will you,” he said with a grin as he took a sip from a bourbon glass.

“You were the chosen one this year and I can’t wait to get you naked. They’ve all been through my games and no one ever wins. And if they by chance do win, then the next year the show is missing a star.”

Stunned, another shiver trickled up her spine. She didn’t know what he meant. Were they fired or had they disappeared? She wasn’t about to ask him. She didn’t know. But basically, he was telling her if she won, she’d be gone to the same place as these other missing women.

“Come, my dear, let us begin. I’ve waited so long for this night,” he said. “You are such a little spitfire and I can’t wait to tame you.”

“Where is Seth,” she said, fearing the worst. What had this deranged man done with the man she loved?

“Oh, don’t worry, he’s here. He’s waiting on you, my dear,” he said as he led her to a basement room that led into the backyard. In the distance, she could see the targets lined up and there beside them was Seth, his hands tied to a stand, a target on his chest right

over his heart.

For a second, she stopped breathing, the fear overwhelming her.

"You monster," she cried as she ran to Seth. "Honey, what has he done to you?"

Seth's eyes opened and he stared at her. "Run, Tessa, run."

"No, I can't," she cried. "I'm not leaving you."

"He's going to kill us both. Run," he commanded.

"I'm not leaving here without you."

Just then Mr. Lovell walked up beside her. "So touching, a lover's reunion. What a shame the National Marksman Association champion is not going to live long enough to enjoy his winnings."

"What do you want?"

"A competition. What else?" he said.

"I no longer compete in competitions after today," she said. "I'm done."

The man roared with laughter. "Oh no, you're not. You have at least one more competition and you really want to win."

Nervously, she stared at him. What was he going to do?

"Here are the rules. As you can see Seth has a target on his chest. When you miss a target, I put a bullet in him."

"No," she cried.

"What? You don't have confidence in your ability to beat me?"

"Do not put a bullet in Seth or I will put a bullet in you."

"I've already thought of that."

A servant came up behind her and removed her guns and her bag of ammunition.

"Tonight, we'll be using blanks," he said. "Or at least, you will."

Blanks were not good for targets; they often went astray. It was why she refused to use them in the show.

She couldn't miss. She had no choice but to make certain she hit every target dead on.

"If you kill him, I will hunt you down. Do you understand me?"

The man laughed. "This is what I love about this game. This is what I enjoy. The life and death of it. The threats and the consequences."

"Let's get this started," she said.

"Wait, there are more rules. If you lose, you will spend the night with me. Where all those things I've been telling you will be done to you." He clapped his hands. "I can hardly wait."

Terror spiraled through her making her shake. She had to stop.

She had to win to protect the baby. To protect Seth.

"You're not going to win," she commanded.

He grinned. "Ladies go first."

She took a deep breath and focused. The first shot was a smidgen to the left, but it hit the target.

"I've enjoyed this sport for as long as I can remember. Every year, I like to take advantage of the winner. Show them I'm still the best."

What did he mean by that? Their winnings? What?

"You can do this," Seth said. "Don't let him shake your focus."

Warmth filled her. Lifting her pistol, she fired the rest of her shots, filling the bull's-eye of the target.

She stepped back. "Your turn."

A wicked, sinister grin spread across his face as he stepped in front of his target and rapidly filled it, taking out the center.

"We're even," he said.

"Next up is the rifle competition. I noticed this is your weakness. This is where I'll beat you."

The man liked to play head games. He did everything he could to make her doubt her abilities. But he wasn't going to win. There was so much more at stake here. Her baby's father, her lover, the man who had her heart. She couldn't lose.

"Doubtful," she said. "In fact, this is where I finish you off."

She lay on the ground and in rapid fire, she hit the target, decimating it into pieces.

"Oh, very nice," he said. "You really are very good, but I'm still going to win."

She didn't respond, knowing he was trying to rile her and she refused to be provoked.

The man went to the ground and proceeded to fill the bull's-eye. Once again, they were tied.

When he rose, he smiled at her in a way that sent a shiver through her. It was like he was gazing at her without her clothes. Like he was certain of his win.

"You know, I've really enjoyed this competition tonight. You're the only person who has ever come so close to beating me, but here is the deciding factor for this competition. In order to win and save yourself from my advances, you have to shoot the target pinned to Seth. Otherwise, I win and you'll spend the night with me."

Terror filled Tessa as she gazed at the man in horror. "No, I'm



not shooting the man I love. That would be murder. And if you shoot him, I'll make certain you hang. I'll leave here screaming at the top of my lungs that you killed him. Let him go now and I'll spend the night with you."

"No," screamed Seth. "Shoot me, Tessa. I'd rather die than for him to do such awful things to you. Shoot me!"

She couldn't look at Seth. She couldn't bear to think of him dying and she also knew that this would destroy their relationship. This monster held all the cards and she only had one choice.

"I can't, Seth, I love you," she said.

The man grinned. "I knew you would come around to my way of thinking. I refuse to let him go until we're finished, but in the morning, when I'm done with you, the two of you will be released."

Seth struggled to get loose. He pulled at the ropes that held him hostage. He began to scream as loud as he could.

"If you don't shut up, I'm going to kill you."

"No, you're not," Tessa said. "You may have me tonight, but rest assured, this is not over."

She would destroy this man for ruining her relationship with the man she loved.

"Now, dear, who is going to believe a woman, a sharpshooter in a wild west show. You women are nothing but trash and I'm a respectable man in the community."

His words were reality and she couldn't help but wonder how many other women he'd done this too. How many women had he trapped and Mr. Walcott ignored their stories? Surely there had to be more.

"Come, my dear. The night awaits us," he said smiling. He turned to Seth. "I'll bring her back in the morning a little more used."

Seth screamed. "Tessa, shoot me. Please, Tessa."

Tears streamed down her face and she followed Mr. Lovell into his lavish home, knowing that no matter what happened tonight, she'd find a way to put him behind bars.

# Chapter 34

Ethel could not watch this happen yet again. This young couple did not deserve this terrible tragedy. No matter what, she had to stop Lovell from ruining their lives.

Running out of her tent, she started yelling. "Ladies, Mr. Lovell is at it once again. This time it's Tessa. We must stop this from happening."

Tears filled some of the women's eyes.

"That son of a bitch. But how can we stop him? The law refuses to listen to us," Francisca said.

No, this couldn't happen again.

"Grab anything that is a weapon and we're going to his house. We're going to stop this once and for all, even if it means I have to kill him."

And she would. The creep had raped most of the women in the show and no one seemed able to stop him, so maybe it was time for him to die.

The knife thrower started handing out knives. "I want these back."

Mr. Walcott came running toward the women and men gathering weapons. "What are you doing? You can't go after him. He's our biggest investor."

Beth, the woman whose husband threw the knives, stepped up and stuck a knife to his throat. "You've let this go on for years. He's raped almost every woman performer in this show and you've done nothing to stop him. We're done. This young couple doesn't deserve what he's doing to them. We're going to save Tessa."

The man's eyes had grown large and his hands were trembling. "But without his money, the show will die."

"And maybe it's time it did if it takes a creep like this man to keep it running. We're done with you not standing up to him."

The man stepped back from her knife and jerked on his coat. "I'll fire anyone who goes up to his house. Do you understand me?"

The women all nodded. "And we'll go to the press to tell them what you allowed to happen."

“Your show will no longer have any performers,” Ethel replied. “Come on, let’s go before we’re too late.”

The women and a few men started toward Main Street in town.

“You won’t get paid,” he screamed. “Anyone who leaves here tonight will not be paid.”

The weightlifter walked over to him and lifted him off the ground by his neck. “We’ll all be paid. Do you understand me? If not, I’ll use you as my barbell and I might even accidentally drop one on you. Are we clear?”

Mr. Walcott nodded the best he could. “Yes,” he squeaked out.

“I’m going to put you down. Don’t cause any more trouble,” the weightlifter said.

Ethel led the group into town. They marched down Sixteenth Street to Meridian Heights. Many of the women knew their way to the big house on the hill.

As they neared the house, they began to shout. “Rapist. Rapist. Rapist.”

# Chapter 35

Seth had never felt such despair, such anger, and the need to kill someone. How could he remain here like this all night, knowing what that monster was doing to his woman?

Seth heard shouts and a glimmer of hope filled him. Suddenly the performers from the show were climbing over the stone wall fences.

“Seth,” Ethel cried when she saw him. Taking a knife, she quickly sawed through the ropes holding him.

“He took her upstairs,” he said.

The knife thrower handed him his gun. “Here you go.”

“Did anyone contact the sheriff?”

“Yes,” Ethel said. “George is trying to get him to respond. But you have to realize, we’ve told him before and he acts like we’re lying. He doesn’t believe the women from the show. We’re loose and we would do it with any man.”

It wasn’t right. And even Seth realized he thought that about the women who came on to him, but still when a woman said no, it meant no.

He grabbed the gun. “Let’s go. I need you to be my witnesses.”

They ran into the house and a male servant screamed when he saw them. Ethel hit him with her fist. “You son of a bitch, you didn’t stop him from hurting me.”

The female servants scurried away and hid while the twenty of them, marched through the house.

“Which way?”

“Down the stairs into the basement. He has a playroom there.”

A playroom? How insane was this man? And he had Tessa.

It was then that he heard Tessa screaming. He ran toward the sound of her voice. The door was locked, and he blew the lock off with his pistol.

The crowd charged through and Seth wanted to kill the man. It was all he could do not to shoot him, but the ass held Tessa in his arms, a gun pointed to her head.

“Oh, you all came to play in my dungeon. Welcome. Some of

you have been here before.”

Tessa stood shaking, her dress was torn and ripped from where he had been removing her clothing with a whip. The bastard.

“Let her go and I’ll let her live,” Seth said.

“Not a chance,” the man said. “In fact, you can watch as I fuck her. Don’t forget I’m a National Marksman Association champion and before you can reach me, I’ll have killed you both.”

Seth wanted to run to her, but knew the man was right. Just then he heard the whir of a whip and he watched as the bull whip artist wrapped the lash around the gun and yanked it from Lovell’s hand.

Seth rushed the man, his fist connecting with his jaw. “I’m going to kill you for hurting my woman. I’m going to make certain you never hurt another woman ever again.”

He repeatedly punched the man, over and over, taking his fear, his fury out on the man who dared to hurt his woman. Over and over, he heard the man’s facial bones cracking, but he couldn’t stop.

Suddenly someone laid a hand on his arm. “He’s not moving. Stop or you’re going to kill him.”

Shaking, he released the man and his body slumped to the floor. Tessa flew into his arms.

“I’m so sorry,” she said.

“Honey, this isn’t your fault,” he said. “I’m just thankful our friends showed up to stop him.”

She ran her hand over his face. “I love you, Seth. I have for weeks, maybe even months.”

Seth kissed her hard on the lips. He loved her so very much, but he wanted to wait until they were alone to tell her, and he even planned on asking her to marry him. But not here in this monster’s dungeon.

He held her so tightly. “I’m thankful we got here when we did.”

“I was so scared,” she said shaking.

“The sheriff is on the way,” the knife thrower said. “He still didn’t believe the women, but he’s coming up here to arrest all of us.”

“Let him come,” the lion tamer’s wife said. “How many here were raped by this asshole?”

Twelve women raised their hands and Seth was shocked. “No one has believed you? The law has done nothing?”

“No,” they all said together.

“Even Mr. Walcott did nothing because Mr. Lovell is his largest investor.”

Tessa slipped out of his arms as the sheriff walked in the door.

“What’s the meaning of this? Mr. Lovell is a fine upstanding member of the community.”

Suddenly Tessa screamed, “Seth, look out.”

Instinctively, Seth moved and pulled out his gun at the same time. He turned and fired the bullet, slamming into the man who had raised and fired a shot at him. The bullet bounced off the stone walls where screams could not be heard.

James Lovell slumped to the ground a smile on his face. He lay there gasping for air as he gazed at Tessa. “You won.”

## Chapter 36

Later that evening in the railroad car, Tessa sobbed in Ethel's arms. "He doesn't love me. I told him I loved him and he never said it back."

"That doesn't mean anything," Ethel said. "It could be that he wanted a more private moment. It could be with everything happening, he was just stunned. Who knows what goes through men's minds? The man was terrified for you, so I know he cares. Don't give up on him."

They were the only two in the railroad car where they huddled after the disastrous night. Seth had been taken to the sheriff's office for questioning. She only hoped they didn't keep him.

"I'm not pretty enough for him and his family is one of the wealthiest in Fort Worth. His father is the mayor, and my family, we're not rich by any means." Tessa leaned back and wiped her face. "If he doesn't say he loves me, then I'm not going to tell him about the baby. And I'm not going back to Texas. I'll stay in New York with Rose."

The older woman shook her head. "You don't understand what it takes to raise a child. It's very hard for a woman alone. I had a husband and it was still the most difficult task I've ever been given. It's also the most joyful. God, I miss my babies."

"Have you ever tried to find them?"

She sighed. "There is no telling what my sorry ass husband told them. No, I haven't, but I've been thinking that maybe this is the year I search for them. What else do I have to do until the next show season?"

They felt the train jolt and begin to move. They were on their way to New York. The show had ended, and they were leaving earlier than they expected. She prayed that Seth had made it on the train in time.

"Did you hear that Mr. Walcott apologized to all the women performers. They were threatening to expose his part in ignoring the complaints about Mr. Lovell. He apologized and gave everyone a raise."

Tessa frowned and lay back against her pillows. The rocking motion of the train was not exactly kind to a pregnant woman. She took deep steadying breaths and willed her mind to the fact that a baby was growing inside her.

"I thought he needed Mr. Lovell's money," she said.

"All lies," Ethel said to her. "Men in power lie and cheat for other wealthy men. No, the show is not rich, but giving us more money is less cash in his pocket."

She thought about the wealthy families in Fort Worth that she knew. Sadie was her friend and the kindest person she knew. "Wealthy women are not that way, and some rich men aren't either."

Tessa told Ethel about Sadie and how she had helped so many people. Then she told her about Rose and that they were going to hear her sing in New York. She spoke of how Hayden, the very wealthy man who had married Rose, and his family were very generous to help those who were not as fortunate.

"It can't be all wealthy men. It's just the greedy ones," Tessa said. "These are just a few of the reasons I want to return home to Texas. The people are kind, the men rugged, and it's a good place. But I can't go home if Seth doesn't love me."

Ethel lay on her bunk. Just then the other two women Susie and Lucy came in. "Oh my God, girls, what an end to the season."

Susie frowned at Tessa. "I owe you an apology."

"What for?"

"Mr. Lovell knew I shared your car, and he gave me the notes to put on your bed. He threatened to rape me again if I didn't do what he said. And frankly, I would have done anything to keep that man from touching me again. I'm really sorry, Tessa."

Tessa had thought that something like this had to be happening, because no one ever saw anyone enter her railcar or tent. How could she blame the woman? She had only experienced him trying to remove her clothes with a whip. And that had been traumatic enough.

"Thanks for the apology and I understand. Thank God, you all arrived when you did. I was one of the fortunate women. It's just sad that the sheriff didn't believe anyone."

Ethel laughed. "It always happened when we stopped in Washington because that's where Mr. Lovell lived. And the law thought he could do no wrong. And we were just a bunch of women



trying to make trouble for him. You would have thought that when this happened every single time we stopped in this city that they would have been suspicious.”

Lucy glanced at Tessa. “Did they arrest Seth?”

“No, but they took him to the station to file a report.”

“What an end to the season,” Susie said.

“I want to apologize also,” Lucy said. “I didn’t place any notes, but I know I gave you grief. I’m sorry.”

“Ladies, it’s our last night together. What should we do to celebrate?” Ethel said.

“I brought us a bottle of champagne,” Susie said.

“Open it up and let’s drink to another season behind us,” Lucy said.

The thought of drinking alcohol was more than Tessa could bare. “Sorry, ladies, you drink my share. I’m feeling a little motion sickness.”

“Have you told Seth you’re pregnant?” Susie asked.

Tessa sat up. Oh my God how did she know, and did anyone else know? If he found out before she told him, then he would be furious.

“How did you know?”

“Usually when someone throws up every morning when their feet hit the floor, it’s a real good sign,” Lucy said.

The women laughed. “Don’t worry, we won’t say anything.”

Tessa felt the tears well up. “Thank you. I don’t think he loves me. I told him I loved him tonight and he didn’t respond.”

“Men,” Susie said. “So damn stubborn and don’t want to admit their feelings. But just watching him tonight fight that bastard, I can tell he loves you. He just can’t say the words yet.”

“Or won’t,” Lucy said.

“Don’t worry, honey, beautiful women like you always get your man.”

“But I’m not beautiful,” Tessa said.

The three women started laughing. “Don’t be ridiculous,” Susie said.

“Stop fishing for compliments,” Lucy said as she popped the cork out of the bottle. “Let’s drink. To the end of the season. And the end of Mr. Lovell, thank you Lord.”

“Amen,” the three women said as Lucy passed the bottle.

Tessa declined her sip and lay back. Tomorrow she would see

Rose and she couldn't wait.

This had been a great experience, but she wanted to go home to her family and her friends. It was time.

# Chapter 37

The next morning as Tessa stepped off the train, she looked for Seth and he was nowhere to be found.

“Have you seen Seth?” she asked the show people, but no one had seen him. They were too busy collecting their money and belongings and meeting family who had gathered at the train station to see them.

Disappointment filled Tessa as she collected her money from Mr. Walcott.

“I’m sorry about what happened, Tessa. I had no idea how brutal he could be.”

How did she respond? Did he not understand that it was more than just the brutality? It was the actual act of rape.

As much as she tried, her anger still came through in her words. “If men experienced rape like women often do, it would stop happening. It’s a violation of our bodies. It would be like me shoving a stick up your ass against your will.”

The man’s face went white and she saw him tremble and knew her words had frightened him.

“Have you seen Seth?”

“No, he picked up his cash early this morning,” he said, staring at her. “Again, I’m sorry.”

She didn’t respond but turned and walked away. If she weren’t pregnant, she’d have her six-shooter out and he’d be doing a dance right there on the train platform.

There was nothing left to do but leave. Had her words of love scared Seth so badly that he left her without saying good-bye?

With a sigh, she gathered her belongings and walked out of the train depot not knowing what to do next.

“Tessa,” she heard her name and turned to see Sadie and Rose standing on the platform waiting for her.

She ran to them. Tears welled in her eyes and she dropped her luggage and threw her arms around both of them.

“Oh my God, I’m so happy to see you. You’re both here.”

“Yes, Seth sent a telegram to me and said to meet you here in

New York.”

He had done that so he could leave her without feeling guilty.

“I can’t find him,” she said. “He’s gone.”

They didn’t respond but picked up her luggage. They knew. They knew that he had deserted her and didn’t want to hurt her feelings. Pain unlike anything she’d ever felt gripped her chest.

“Come on, I’ve got a suite at the Ritz Carlton and we’re staying there,” Sadie said.

“I’m pregnant,” she said, the words spewing from her mouth.

Their brows lifted in surprise and then they were hugging her.

“Congratulations,” Sadie said. “You’re the first.”

“I’m so happy for you,” Rose said.

“But I’m not married and Seth has disappeared. What am I going to do?”

Sadie took her by her arm and Rose picked up her suitcase.

“You’re going home with me and we’re going to go have dinner at this luxurious restaurant and then we’re going to go hear Rose sing tonight. Everything is going to be just fine.”

Tessa wiped away a tear from her eye.

“I’ve missed you both so much. You always make me feel better. I love you.”

“And we love you,” Rose said. “No matter what, we’re going to have a wonderful time just being together. To hell with Seth and all men. The Bad Girls are back together.”

Giggling, they left the train station.

An hour later, the three women were all sitting in Sadie’s suite laughing and talking like old times. Tessa told them what happened with the show and how Seth had saved her from Mr. Lovell, but she couldn’t talk much about Seth without tearing up.

“Where is Hayden and Levi?”

“They are out doing manly things and giving us some girl time. They knew we would be talking all afternoon and didn’t want to interrupt or interfere since we hadn’t seen each other in so long.”

Tessa leaned back and suddenly felt exhausted. “Would you girls mind if I closed my eyes for just a few moments. This baby seems to sap the strength right out from me.”

“Go right ahead,” Rose told her. “I need to get dressed for tonight’s performance.”

“I can’t believe you’re a big time opera star,” Tessa said as she closed her eyes.

"I'll get your dress ready for tonight," Sadie said.

Two hours later, Sadie woke her. "Sweetie, you've got to get ready. It's almost time to go to dinner. Are you feeling all right?"

Tessa yawned. "I feel much better and I'm starving."

Sadie and Rose helped Tessa dress into a gold evening gown and Rose did her hair. She put a white flower in the curls she pulled to the side.

"The men are waiting at the restaurant. We need to go," Sadie said.

They hurried down the stairs to a cab was waiting for them. When Tessa woke, she made the decision that tonight would be about her friend Rose, and she refused to be sad about Seth any longer. He'd made his choice and she and the baby would be fine.

They reached the restaurant and the maître de smiled at them. "Right this way, ladies."

They were taken to a private dining room and each of them were seated.

"Where is Levi and Hayden," Tessa asked.

"They're coming," Sadie said.

Just then the door opened, and first Levi, then Hayden, and finally Seth walked into the room.

Stunned, Tessa stared at the man she loved. In his hands was a bouquet of flowers. He walked to her, took her hand, and lifted her from her chair.

Then he dropped to one knee. Oh my God, this was really happening.

"Tessa Harris, you are the most interesting woman I've ever met. You keep life entertaining, and I love the way you challenge me and make me a better man. You've tamed the womanizer and I want you to be my woman forever."

He opened a jewelry box and gazed up into her eyes. "I love you more than my next breath and want to spend the rest of my life by your side. Please marry me and be my wife."

Tears flowed down her face and she glanced at their friends. "You all knew about this?" They laughed and grinned at her. "When I couldn't find you this morning, I thought you had abandoned me. I thought when I told you I loved you, I scared you away and I wasn't rich or beautiful enough for you."

Seth shook his head. "Woman, you are the most beautiful person I've ever been with and I don't give a damn about your riches. I just

want you to be my wife and to love me forever.”

“I’ve been waiting for you to say I love you. Yes, I’ll marry you, but it has to be soon. We are having a baby in seven and a half months.”

Seth’s eyes widened and he grinned from ear to ear as he rose from his knee and threw his arms around her. “Oh my God, a baby. I love you so very much, Tessa. I would have quit the show weeks ago, except for loving you and wanting to protect you.”

They pulled apart and he slipped the engagement ring on her finger. “As soon as we get back to Texas, we’ll marry.”

“Or we could do it right here in New York. You and Tessa *and* me and Sadie,” Levi said.

The women smiled.

“That sounds like a grand idea,” Sadie said.

“Yes, let’s do that,” Seth said. “If you’re fine with sharing our special day.”

“These are my friends. What a wonderful way to share our happiness. Yes, let’s get married in New York.”

Rose grinned at Hayden. “Our wedding was special and yours will be too. We’ll find the perfect place.”

“A baby and a wedding,” Seth said. “I can’t wait, Tessa, to make you legally mine.”

She reached up and carassed his face. “Ethel and the girls were right. They said you loved me. They said give you some time.”

“And I do with all my heart. I’m yours forever.”

# Chapter 38

Later that night they sat at the opera and waited for Rose to come on stage. When it was her turn, she sang a song that put tears in Tessa's eyes. Her voice was smooth and beautiful, and she had no trouble hitting the high notes. It was a heavenly song that reached inside and soothed and calmed and made her feel grateful she was there.

Sadie leaned over. "She's going to sing at our wedding ceremony. The great Rose Lee."

"We may be Fort Worth's Bad Girls, but we're so blessed to be such good friends."

Sadie hugged her and the music crescendoed as Seth squeezed her hand. She glanced at him and knew she would always be in love with this man.



\* \* \*

Tessa and Seth very quickly became my favorite couple of this series. In fact, I had planned on ending this series with their book. We saw Rose and Hayden happy and her singing opera. We saw Sadie and Levi about to get married with Tessa and Seth and they were happy. Then my editor said, but what about Nellie? You've got to write Nellie's story. So look for Nellie's story in December. Another Christmas book and you have to admit, she needs some Christmas spirit. Nellie's Redemption coming in December.

*As always, thanks for reading my stories.*

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# Charity

Christmas Eve 1914

At nearly seventy years of age, Charity stepped into the living room where the children sat around the tree, anxiously awaiting the adults. Not as patiently as she had hoped as she watched Mick wrestle Christopher to the ground.

Glancing around, she felt so blessed as she stared at the little ones descended from her and her friends. Who would ever have thought five mail-order brides from Charleston would be so fortunate?

"Great-grandmother, tell us the story of how you came to Angel Creek."

"Child, you have heard that tale many a time," she said, pulling the girl to her, knowing any holiday spent with friends and family could be her last.

"Tell it again." Her nine-year-old great-granddaughter Sarah—named after her best friend—said, dancing.

Little Sarah slipped her hand into hers and led her to a rocker in the corner as everyone gathered around her.

Her heart swelled with so much love, tears sprang to her eyes.

She glanced up just as her friend, the older Sarah came into the room. "Charity, are you going to tell that story again?"

"The children want to hear it," she replied wanting one last remembrance of that trying time.

"Please," they cried in unison.

Julia one of the original brides, grinned and nodded. "It's a beautiful story."

"A Christmas story," Charity said smiling. "Of hope after such a terrible time."

"Of love and happiness," Ruby, another one of the brides said sticking her head in the door.

There was much Charity didn't tell the younger generation, because some things were meant for grown-ups, but always the trials and tribulations remained the same.

"Wait for me," Anna said, the last of the five brides, as she used

her cane to walk to the nearest chair. Somehow they were all still alive, the oldest pushing eighty with the families they'd longed for.

"After the Civil War, very few young men returned to Charleston, South Carolina. Many men died during the war or never came home. Leaving five young lady friends, all wanting husbands and children, believing they would be old maids or worse."

The children laughed.

"Including me, until we became mail-order brides..."

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After the war leaves Charleston devastated, and with few prospects of marriage, five friends headed west for a new life and a possible love match. A year later, they invite six friends to join them. The following Christmas, they're still homesick and in desperate need of a deeper connection with their old life, so what else can a Southern Belle do but invite more would-be brides to travel west?

Angel Creek is about to be invaded yet again by more Southern Misses and the town most definitely will never be the same!

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USA Today Best-selling author, Sylvia McDaniel obviously has too much time on her hands. With over seventy western historical and contemporary romance novels, she spends most days torturing her characters. Bad boys deserve punishment and even good girls get into trouble. Always looking for the next plot twist, she's known for her sweet, funny, family-oriented romances.

Married to her best friend for over twenty-five years, they recently moved to the state of Colorado where they like to hike, and enjoy the beauty of the forest behind their home with their spoiled dachshund Zeus and puppy Bailey. (He has his own column in her newsletter.)

Their grown son, still lives in Texas. An avid football watcher, she loves the Broncos and the Cowboys, especially when they're winning.

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**The End!**







